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OUR HANDS BUILT THIS HOUSE

by

Sarah Rose Benal

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Accepted by:

David Bajo, Director of Thesis

Elise Blackwell, Reader

Julia Elliott, Reader

Michael Gavin, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION

To Katherine and Erin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to David Bajo and Elise Blackwell for their incredible care and attention, and Michael Gavin and Julia Elliott for serving on my thesis committee.

But most of all thank you to Tony, whose faith and light always remind me why I'm here.

ABSTRACT

Three sisters attempt to grapple with their personal setbacks while their midwestern town experiences a series of tragedies during the summer.

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Charlotte

The air was green and scattered with tornadoes that summer. Charlotte could count on one hand how many tornadoes she had experienced in her life but her mother, Maggie, knew enough stories that she could fold her fingers back in her palms and start again. Lincoln, Nebraska was safe because the land dipped bowl-like between the counties, but sirens were normal and Charlotte woke up with news of the destruction that occurred in Norfolk, Broken Bow, and McCook. They were towns Charlotte had never been, had no interest in seeing, and still felt a distinct sadness whenever she saw the pictures of collapsed farmhouses and the dusty faces. She felt trapped in the city as she watched distant clouds gather and threaten the ground.

On a Monday afternoon at the end of April, Charlotte was cotton-mouthed and exhausted as she half-listened to Father Carlisle. He prodded them for responses over Governor Murray's campaign to reinstate the death penalty. The late afternoon sun shone off the bald spot in his receding hairline, but he stood straight, his elbows tucked against his sides as he emphasized his love of public debate. Charlotte slouched in her chair and checked her phone. There were twenty-five students crammed in the small room and Charlotte didn't have to stretch far before she touched the desks beside her. She estimated three people were paying attention as silence followed Father's questions. The girl in front of Charlotte scrolled through Instagram, double-tapping a

bruised purple Nebraska sunset. Charlotte straightened and tried cracking her neck when she felt her friend Joy tap her shoulder. Charlotte looked up and saw Father staring at her with one eyebrow raised.

“Thank you for joining us, Miss O’Donnell.”

“I wasn’t-“

“Come on, guys,” he cut her off, “Do you think the Governor is in his right? Should he even be giving us the option?” Charlotte watched him take seven steps to the right. His heels clicked when he closed them together and she knew he’d take another seven steps to the left.

“Father, no offense, but we can’t even vote,” the guy on Charlotte’s right said. He tucked his too-long hair in the collar of his polo shirt.

“But most of you will be voters soon. Next year even. And it’s important that St. Wenceslaus prepares you for the world’s...complexities.”

“My parents voted for Murray, did they do something wrong?” a girl asked. “I mean, I think he just wants us to be safe and sometimes you have to make sacrifices for the greater good, right?”

“My parents did too!”

Charlotte picked a scab on her knee.

“He goes to my church. He’s nice.” The girl leaned forward and pointed her pencil at Father. “Besides, these criminals already had their chance. And the ones on death row have done horrible things- like murder.”

Carlisle opened his hands so his palms faced up but didn’t reply. Instead he let voices build, awakened by their neighbors. Charlotte felt Joy’s eyes on the back of her neck but didn’t turn around. The entire year had been like this. Father did little or no mediating except to offer the occasional quote from the Catechism or ask for an interpretation from the Bible. Charlotte gave up participating back in February because it was clear no one actually listened to each other. She tugged the edge of her navy blue shorts and glanced at the large clock over the dry erase board.

Charlotte liked school in an abstract way; an enthusiasm supported by memories and the awe of how fast it was all moving. But walking through the front door each morning interrupted her sleepy haze with seriousness and formality. Built in the 1970s, the building needed new pipes and most teachers shared their classrooms, but the diocese often elected for another religious statue or painting. Last year administration broke with tradition and put turf on the football field, which the marching tracked into the halls for the next two weeks. Everywhere Charlotte turned she faced a martyr’s sad, morose gaze with blood dripping down their temples. Once she caught Joy staring at St. Lucy.

“I know I’m supposed to feel a desire to live like her and all but,” Joy leaned closer and studied the eyeballs Lucy held in her pale hand, “don’t you feel like you’re getting used to all this? How long have we had this painting? Is it new?”

“I think that’s been here for a while.”

“I’ve never noticed it.”

In Father’s class, Charlotte followed the laminated mysteries of the rosary around the room and was stuck on the Assumption when a folded piece of paper landed on her desk. She opened it and saw the list of priests ranked from least to most attractive. Father Carlisle’s name had been scrawled and crossed out multiple times, moved from middle to the top five. *Good butt* was written beside his name. Charlotte snorted before refolding it and tossing it to the next desk.

The bell rang and Father pointed to the words he had written on the board, yelling over their zipping backpacks and chatter. “Read these pages in your Church history text. We’re still in school for two more weeks. This will be on the final.”

Joy caught up with Charlotte in the hall. “They’re a bunch of dicks.”

“Whatever. I’m used to it by now.”

“Really? God, they make me so mad. Like, *of course* he’s a nice guy. He’s a politician.”

Charlotte opened her locker and pushed aside old papers collected in the back. She stood a moment, confused as she realized she didn’t need anything from it. She

kept her hand on the door and steadied herself as others pushed by. Joy appeared at her side, waiting. She had a soft face and her brown hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail that flopped to the side. Charlotte knew she wanted to keep talking about class but she didn't have a response. She was bored and annoyed that Joy was acting surprised, as if she hadn't watched similar conversations unfold over gay marriage and sex and what they were supposed to wear when the Bishop visited. Charlotte pulled her backpack's straps, trying to make it more comfortable and ignore the metal can pressing against her shoulder.

"Ellie's waiting."

Joy followed her outside to the grassy patch around the St. Wenceslaus marquee. They sat with their backs facing the announcements for the choir concert and the upcoming soccer games as they watched cars move through the pick up line.

"Hey, do I smell?" Charlotte asked.

"I'm not going to smell you."

"I haven't washed these shorts in a while. And I hate the skirts because they don't have pockets."

Joy looked at her own blue and green plaid skirt before sniffing her friend's shoulder. "You're fine." They were quiet a moment and Charlotte regretted her lack of response over class. Joy was her friend and even though her earnestness sometimes

came off annoying, Charlotte usually appreciated it in the end. She watched Joy pluck a blade of grass and twist it around her finger.

“That’s pretty,” Charlotte said when Joy slid it off and left behind a gently coiled ribbon.

“My mom always gets mad when I do this. She says I’ll strip the yard.”

Charlotte hummed. “You know I agree with you. That class is the worst. I just think it helps to ignore it.”

“You could say something.”

Charlotte stretched her legs and opened and closed her feet so her converse formed a V. Joy looked behind her and pointed toward the student parking lot.

“Did I tell you my brother crashed mine?”

“Which one?”

“Tom. He was speeding on a game day. So was the other guy, which didn’t surprise me but I’m so mad at myself for letting him borrow it.”

Charlotte saw Ellie pull up and pushed herself off the grass. Maybe they should say something to Carlisle, but Charlotte worried her complaints would come off like she was scared of her classmates, which was laughable, but she didn’t think Carlisle would really understand if she told him that he was allowing them to feed each other. It was “debate,” it was breeding. Anger stung her cheeks as Charlotte imagined Carlisle leaning over, his soft smile dripping over her like she was a child.

Ellie honked.

“Are you going downtown? We can give you a ride.”

Joy declined. “I’m not really into those the way you are.”

“I thought you were. We just helped Theo put together that global warming thing.” Ellie honked again and Charlotte jumped, “I’m coming!”

“I guess. I don’t know. I think I’m going to sit this one out.”

“You were just complaining about religion class! Here’s a chance to actually do something.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“It just is.” Joy stood and looked around her. “My brother’s here. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

Charlotte pressed her lips together as Joy half-waved and stepped around her. She wasn’t mad but she was irritated with Joy’s lack of perception. If she really wanted to do something, she would do it. St. Wensc might be a lost cause and maybe neither of them would end up saying something about class, but at least they could go downtown and scream for a while, be around others who felt similar. She huffed and went to her sister’s car.

"About time," her older sister said. Air conditioning blasted from the vents and stung Charlotte's face. They were quiet as Ellie checked the street, the turn signal's clicking grew and Charlotte noted each space where Ellie had the chance to pull out. Instead of speaking she hugged her knees to her chest while trees collected around them. They slowed with the traffic. Ellie's fingers hovered over the radio presets before she settled on a top forty station and turned the volume down. She turned left.

"Aren't you taking me downtown?"

"Oh. I didn't know you were serious about that."

"Of course I'm serious. The governor should be taken seriously."

Ellie's blonde hair had grown out and split ends fanned over her shoulders. She bit her thumbnail, painted with a shiny, clear topcoat. The car rattled over a pothole.

"You're right. You've been going downtown a lot though, so I thought you'd be tired of it."

"Why does everyone keep saying I'm tired? I'm not tired. I just know when to pick my battles," She opened the glove box, "where are your CDs?"

"Andrea has them. Are you okay? I just see pictures of these things and they don't look that exciting. Boring, even. So I'd imagine they get discouraging after a while."

"I'm fine." Charlotte twisted in her seat, "This one won't be boring. The governor is funneling illegal drugs to kill people he doesn't like. That's infuriating. People will be

there. They should be.” Outside the houses grew smaller, their driveways tilting into the busy street. Over the traffic Charlotte could make out the road’s wide curve that expanded into downtown. “Class was kind of annoying today.”

“You’ll graduate soon.”

They stalled at a red light and Charlotte studied Ellie’s profile. She had a sharp jaw and was thin enough that muscles protruded with slight tension. The gold studs in her ears were dull but dainty. She was pretty, but tired, and the skin under her eyes was dark purple. Ellie pulled her fingers through a section of hair. The static lifted the strands from her face.

“Thanks for the ride, by the way.”

Ellie turned and smiled quick before driving forward. They followed the curves into downtown and the capital rose up like a spike beside a student loan office and the history museum. Charlotte caught glimpses between buildings of people walking and she hoped they were headed for the protest. She smoothed her uniform shorts.

“You’re going to stand out,” Ellie laughed and pulled into a parallel spot. Charlotte pulled her backpack onto her lap and kept it in front of her as she exited the car. “Hey, can you get a ride home? I have to work and I think mom might’ve picked up an extra shift at Markman’s.”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Charlotte swung her backpack over her shoulders and widened her eyes. Her face felt hot, "Ellie, I'm fine. Really. I'll see you later." She slammed the door and turned but caught Ellie rolling her eyes through the window. She forced herself into an even pace so that the materials but it was difficult the closer she got to the crowd. They were gathered at the base of the capital. The tall, skinny building was supposed to have been modeled after the Lincoln Memorial but between the clumps of offices at the bottom and the rounded dome at the top, the result was a lot more anatomical. She ignored the embarrassment and instead focused on the people in front of her. She pushed through to the center, locking herself into the wall of bodies. No one looked at her even as she felt her sticky skin rub against the others. The closeness alarmed and energized Charlotte. When she looked up she saw a man, Travis, she guess, the organizer. She hadn't actually met him yet, only heard about him from Theo. He scanned the group, a megaphone dangling from his fingers. A woman with a clipboard said something to him and he raised it to his lips and pressed the siren. The crowd yelled.

"Governor Murray does not respect the people he represents," Travis cried. "He is a poor example of our values and condones murder because it suits his personal interests."

The crowd roared. People jostled around Charlotte with their signs and her heart beat so hard it was almost painful. Travis continued, "We came together and spoke. We used our voices and now he uses his power to silence us."

"Murderer!" a man yelled from behind.

Charlotte joined the chant that rippled through her, amazed at the way she could still hear her own voice. It felt like a confirmation she was contributing to the sound.

“Fuck Murray!” Charlotte yelled.

Travis outlined the path they would take downtown and up Weston Street, then south until they stood in front of the governor’s mansion. He waved his hands like he was directing a symphony. Charlotte looked through the bodies, past a woman with a baby strapped to her chest, and saw Theo standing on the sidewalk’s edge. He had his messenger bag, his arms crossed over the straps and his long hair pushed behind his ears. Charlotte felt like she had to remind herself she was older than Theo by almost five months. He always looked older than seventeen and she wished she knew how he managed to look so present. Like the space he stood had been reserved for him.

She pushed through to meet him.

“It’s so gross in there, sweaty,” Charlotte said, shaking her arms out.

“People are paying more attention to each other than they are to Travis. Or they’re trying to out-do Travis.” His voice was higher than some. It arched casually from one sentence to the next.

“Really? It felt...pretty motivated to me.”

“I saw him at Full Moon a few hours ago. He was excited but he’s too optimistic.”

“He worked really hard.”

“But he doesn’t have a clear message,” Theo frowned. “He’s trying to push together five different points and it sounds messy. In a minute he’ll start rambling about gentrification and bike lanes.”

Charlotte looked back and her stomach dropped when she saw how small the protest was. There was a group curved around Travis, but the edges were frayed as smaller groups drifted away from him. Only a few people held up their posters while others milled around. Charlotte felt disappointed, but there was also a small sense of alarm at the realization of how wrong she’d been. They had looked so much bigger when she was in Ellie’s car.

“You have the masks, right? And the spray?” Theo interrupted. Charlotte nodded. “Okay. Let’s go then. We shouldn’t be standing here.”

Their walking soon turned into an urgent stride and the anxiety felt like a hinderance for Charlotte. She’d been fine earlier, but now she wondered if she had been storing nervous energy. She felt it shoot through her body as Travis leaned into the street, checking for cars, and leading them between buildings and around the neighborhood’s small backyards. Soon, towering oaks shielded them and cast kaleidoscopic shadows against his grey shirt. They crossed a park, the dry grass scratching her skin as they approached the iron gate wrapped around the Governor’s mansion.

“Masks?”

Charlotte crouched and rifled through her bag. She handed one to Theo and placed the other over her own face.

“Keep an eye out for security.”

She pulled out the spray bottle, which Theo took as well, tested it, and took long steps to the flowers lined along the gate. They looked hyper colored next to the dry grass. The fat peonies bobbed between the bars and their petals sprinkled the ground. Charlotte cradled one in her hand before letting it fall, the scattered petals reminding her of snow.

She watched Theo saturate the flowers while a breeze pushed the smell through the gaps around the mask and made her nose itch. She wanted to speak but worried her voice would break Theo’s concentration. She stood and saw Theo flinch when her knees popped. He thrust his empty hand toward his bag and Charlotte realized how far behind she was in their plan. She passed over loose pens and dislodged the rolled poster from the bottom. When she unfurled it, Theo had finished with the flowers and she could read *you kill, we kill* in her own immature handwriting, the tail of the last ‘y’ dripping from the spray paint. She placed the poster on the grass, found the two plastic stakes and taped them to the back. When she stuck it in the dirt she hoped the words ran evenly over the destroyed flowers.

Theo surveyed the grounds. Charlotte watched the flowers, their pink edges already browned and curled. She touched a daffodil she hadn’t noticed were planted behind the peonies and its fragile leaves turned to dust between her fingers. She turned

and saw Theo's face, the mask moving and his eyes wide but the sound was muffled. Panic seized her and she ducked as if touched. But nothing happened. Instead, Theo steadied the poster, looked at her and ran.

They had agreed to split up after the project and Theo wanted to discuss it later at Full Moon. But she felt vacant as she froze in the moments between Theo's run and her own sprint. She wasn't sure how long she'd been standing before she noticed the rush of air over her cheeks and saw the park had turned back into the neighborhood. She stopped and placed a hand over her chest. The first hit creates resonance, she reminded herself. The percussion builds and reaches more people.

The surrounding neighborhood was cool and she tried not to swat the breeze that brushed against her neck.

Andrea

Andrea's hand hovered over the doorknob and she counted to three again. It was dark in the hallway outside her apartment and it'd be dark inside too, whether someone was home or not. The basement apartment had never felt that comfortable. She could see her chipped nail polish and kept her eye on the smudged knob so she didn't have to confront the door, which felt taller than usual and possibly threatened to collapse on her. Maybe she was imagining it. She felt like that a lot.

Water rushed through the pipes above her and she promised herself she would open the door once it stopped. She listened and stared until the door and the concrete walls blurred. *This is a footnote in my life*, she thought, *think big picture*.

The water shut off and she waited a moment before she pushed the door open and stepped into the room. Their old rust-red couch sat in the middle, its arms almost touched the low dining table. An unfolded throw blanket lay on the floor but to her relief, she was alone.

"Hello?" Andrea tested and took a hesitant step in when no one responded. She twisted her hands around the purse strap that crossed her chest. The apartment was tiny and damp. She and her roommates had agreed to keep the air conditioning off to save money and the only source of natural light came from the three small windows along the top. Claire and Lydia had found it and Andrea had said yes immediately when

they invited her, thrilled to finally move out of her mom's. It was after she signed the lease she noticed the fridge door hit the counter when she opened it. And the bathroom had black mold. And that Lydia and Claire would be share a room, leaving Andrea alone on the other side of the apartment.

"Aren't you happy to have your own room?" they asked when Andrea had protested. It wasn't that she was unhappy, and after sharing a room with Ellie and Charlotte she knew she should be grateful. But on the first night after she closed the door to her new room, she felt left out.

Andrea dragged her fingers over the couch and noted the missing television and the holes in the bookcase. Claire had probably moved out earlier, although Andrea suspected Claire checked out months ago and couldn't wait any longer. She was like that, quiet and stealthy. She often went unnoticed but most people called her charming and polite. Not Claire, others said when Andrea explained how her roommates signed a lease without telling her. She's so nice and quiet.

Not Lydia, they also said. She's so nice and cool.

Andrea wished there had been a fight but instead it was more like watching ice melt. One second there's a solid object, shrinking but visible, and then it's gone. Andrea stood in front of their bedroom door three different times last week and scolded herself for letting time slip by. For letting her friends slip by.

She went to the kitchen and saw most of the plates were gone when she opened the cabinet. There were plenty of spoons though for some reason. She picked one up

and examined the water spots before tossing in the sink so she could hear the sharp ringing against the basin. The fridge had half a bag of string cheese, mustard, and La Croix, all hers.

“How dare they” she said to no one. The walls shook as someone stomped overheard and she could see a spider skitter over the wall. Her arms ached but no matter how hard she shook them she couldn’t release the tension that pulled over her skin. She wished she knew how to use it to propel herself into Claire and Lydia’s faces and tell them how much they hurt her. But they weren’t here and even if they were Andrea knew she’d turn back into her room before they walked through the door.

She walked out of the kitchen and concentrated on making her steps even as she walked toward Claire and Lydia’s room. Once inside she took in Claire’s mess and the chunky dark dressers. Lydia’s was farther away and through the shadows Andrea could see the small mountain range of picture frames containing her nieces and nephews. But it was Claire’s that interested her. The roommate that was so secretive and flighty and had boys visit her late on weeknights while Andrea’s hair was still wet from a shower. How they had both shrugged and told her she could stay in her room if she was so embarrassed.

But it wasn’t the embarrassment for Andrea. She remembered blushing, looking down at the beige carpet, shocked by Lydia’s tone and raised eyebrows. It was about the fact that their space had been violated; their sacred cave invaded by outsiders. They were okay that? “Surprises are nice,” Claire had said. Andrea disagreed.

A pair of crescent-shaped earrings laid on top of the dresser, and their smooth exteriors caught the small streaks of light from the window. She pocketed them before she smoothed her hand over the dented wood. The top dresser squeaked as she pulled it open. Inside she saw a sliver of neon pink underneath Claire's earth tones. It was so unlike anything Claire owned that Andrea stopped and thought about what she was doing. Her nose itched but she hadn't noticed any dust. She kept her hands rested over the soft fabrics, her fingers twitching until it bunched under her palm..She didn't know what she was looking for but it occurred to her that if she did know, she wouldn't know where to start. She knew this dresser was Claire's but how much did Claire really need anything from it? It was closer to the door, easier to reach.

Andrea dropped her wrists and felt the drawer's edge dig into her skin. She recognized this feeling, but now she knew it was because she'd always been separated.

Water ran through the pipes again and the sound reminded Andrea of a large crowd. It was like when everyone talks at the same time and their words become indecipherable and mangled, which was sometimes overwhelming but also sometimes comforting. She thought how sometimes it was okay to let chaos wash over you. She imagined the water running and running until it flooded the room and looked back at the pink. Pushing away the fabric she saw it was a vibrator. Claire had wrapped it in a dark blue scarf woven with silver threads that shone in the limited light. Andrea returned the earrings and took the toy instead, making sure to keep the scarf between the two of them, shoving it in her purse that still hung over her body.

Ellie

Downtown, Ellie rubbed her neck, unsticking the hairs that clung to her skin and turned the car key again. It rumbled and she begged it to catch. After the fourth try she sat back and stared at the wheel, avoiding the protesters that walked by. She pulled the collar of her white shirt until it hung lopsided around her neck.

She could go find Charlotte in the crowd, but the idea of tracking down her younger sister during the event was embarrassing and she didn't want to drag her away. Her mom didn't want Charlotte there in the first place and Ellie didn't know what she'd say if Charlotte came home angry. If there was one thing Ellie was good at right now, it was making everyone mad at her.

In the grand scheme of things Ellie agreed with Charlotte. But what Charlotte didn't understand was that even though the governor and the students and teachers at St. Wenc could be rage-inducing, they were small parts in a much larger war. Ellie worried that, like her, Charlotte would run herself into the ground if she kept fighting impossible battles. She needed to pace herself.

But Ellie figured Charlotte saw the nine years between them as too far to bridge. She didn't listen to her, not anymore. A part of Ellie thought that should be upsetting but she felt relief instead, accepting the fact that her advice had an expiration and her

abandoned law career looked like defeat to Charlotte. She saw things in black-and-white.

From her parking spot Ellie could see the crowd's edge but no sign of her sister. The volume rose with the crowd's chants but the words were mangled and indecipherable. Her best friend Noah would tell her to seize the opportunity and leave the car for now, deal with it later. "Let it all out," he'd tell her, "then come back and reassess." But the protest didn't look like a place she could do that. She pressed her forehead against the window and watched the bodies push together. A girl carrying a poster walked by, her shoulder blades poked through her skin.

Ellie tried the car again and this time it started. Carefully she merged and drove past the tight street lined with boutiques and Husker sportswear shops. Their colorful awnings arched over the two lanes. Ellie stopped at a red light while a cyclist wove around her and onto the sidewalk. Ahead she could see the lights turn green and she knew by the time she could move, they'd be red again.

The townhouse was one of many identical homes on the edge of town. They were candlewax yellow with concrete patios and guarded with thorny shrubs that snapped off and littered the driveways after storms. Inside, Maggie used two bookcases – a tall one and another that was short and long – to divide the kitchen from the main room. There were two bedrooms upstairs, one of which Ellie had shared with her two

sisters for four years before moving out for college, and now shared with Charlotte again.

The house did not belong to Maggie. Painting the walls required permission and color approval. The downstairs remained unfinished. Pictures could not be hung up with nails and so most leaned against walls or within the bookcases. Ellie assumed that along with the general restrictions, other anxieties prevented her mom from attaching herself to the house. They had lived there since the divorce fifteen years before but there was still a level of unrest. Magazines and books crowded the shelves. Boxes overflowed with outgrown clothes and old school uniforms piled in the basement. Their furniture was sturdy but was mismatched and faded.

The house was half a house, less than twelve-hundred square feet. Visitors were often surprised they had managed to live squeezed together like they had, and that seemed to a point of pride for Maggie. Ellie's friends' parents had sets of frames displaying every school picture in succession or throw pillows for various holidays. She knew people expected a house full of women to be stylish, or at least coordinated, but theirs was not. The chaos didn't embarrass Ellie, but the lack of sentiment was unsettling.

After the protest Ellie leaned on the open fridge door and studied the food even though she wasn't hungry. She closed it when she heard her mom yelp from the living room.

"You okay?" Ellie called.

"It's fine. I'm fine. I just need another piece of cardboard for the couch."

Ellie watched as Maggie pulled herself up from the collapsed couch and lifted the cushion to inspect the broken fabric. Her faded auburn hair was pulled back in a fluffy ponytail and she still had on her work slacks. She patted Ellie's shoulder on the way to the garage. The cool air drifted over the kitchen tile.

"When you get a chance," Maggie said as she searched, "there's a set of sheets in my closet. Could you wash them? Andrea's coming back for a bit."

"What? Why?"

"Her roommates fell through. I feel so bad because I always liked Lydia. She's so funny and used to give Andrea rides to school all the time. Remember?" She straightened and placed her hands on her hips.

"I guess."

"Are you working tonight?"

"Yeah. At seven. But I'm going to stop by Noah's for a bit beforehand."

Ellie tried not to push her mom about Andrea, but she wanted to know how long her mom had known about this. Andrea was allowed the unpredictability of college and could jump from house to house if she wanted. It was Ellie who shouldn't be there and took up too much space, anything she said would be hypocritical. Maggie waved a piece of cardboard in the air, victorious, but Ellie could only half-smile. She loved Andrea but

they hadn't all lived together in years- at least since Ellie had been in high school. And now they were supposed to go back to that?

"Want to watch something?" Maggie asked, "We've let the DVR pile up."

"No. I guess I need to...find those sheets."

Maggie sighed, "Don't do that, Ellie."

"Do what? I'm fine."

She trudged upstairs and stopped on the carpeted landing between the two bedrooms when the front door slammed and shook the walls.

"I'm home!" Charlotte's voice flew up the stairs. Ellie counted her sister's steps, tried guessing what snack she was searching for in the cabinets, heard her low mumbling butt against their mom's lighter voice. Ellie walked away, into her mom's room and shoved the door closed with both hands, trying to seal the gap where the frame had warped from the summer's humidity.

Their mom loved them too much and Ellie felt she had taken advantage of that when she moved back the month before.

"You weren't evicted. You wisely chose not to renew your lease," Maggie tried when Ellie confessed her financial situation.

"I beat them to it."

Maggie had Ellie when she was a teenager, but grey hairs sprung up around her temples while lines ran across her eyes and lips. She didn't color her hair but often ran her hands over the spots she knew displayed the most grey. She'd press her palms against her temple and smooth the sections over as if trying to erase it. Among her friends, she stood out because she was the one who did not dye her hair or wear bright colors.

Even before the divorce, Ellie thought their mom had an astounding ability to pull things together at the last minute. Maggie somehow always found a solution that kept the world from falling apart: the full rent payment minutes before the office closed, tuition, health scares. It made Ellie nervous but Maggie had faith in her system, which carried over from home to her job as manager at Markman's, a small department store in the middle of town.

"Are these the sheets?" Ellie flipped the plastic package over and inspected the baby blue fabric, "They look new."

Maggie didn't look up from her book, "I thought Andrea deserved them. It sounds like she's had a really tough time the last few weeks."

"Mom. She's fine. You shouldn't--"

Using her finger to mark her page, Maggie closed the book. She had to lean her neck back to see Ellie from the couch. "Ellie, I know, okay. But I don't want Andrea coming home and thinking she has nothing to look forward to or that she has to sit

around and be sad. New, clean sheets are a nice way to welcome someone.” She pulled her legs up on the couch. “Maybe she’ll start drawing again. I think she needs that too.”

“It’s going to be crowded, isn’t it?”

“We’ll make it work.”

“Andrea has so much stuff.”

Maggie shook her head. Her lips were tight and her blue eyes wide. Ellie shrunk back and folded her arms around the package so the plastic corner scratched her arm. She felt hot and struggled to push down the unwarranted complaints: that she had gotten there first and this was part of college and Andrea would inevitable bring with her whatever drama it was that drove her out. She stood in front of her mom a moment longer before she turned, dropped the sheets on the bookcase, and went upstairs to get ready for work.

She was embarrassed and regretted her tone, her comments, everything that put her into this position of so little power. But she thought her mom wasn’t acknowledging how hard it would be to squeeze all four of them in the house again.

Ellie couldn’t find the sweatshirt she wanted, the grey one that didn’t balloon around her waist. So she took a blue one of Charlotte’s noting the worn lining and worried it wouldn’t keep her warm in her freezing office.

At Noah's Ellie followed the smooth curves of a salsa jar's label sitting on the coffee table in front of her. Noah's voice hovered in the distance, making her giggle until his long fingers ripped the jar from her gaze. Her stomach twisted.

"Go to work," Noah instructed.

Ellie sunk deeper into the leather couch, hugging a pillow her chest, heavy with the lavender scent Noah sprayed over everything whenever he smoked.

"I've seen you drive high before, Ellie. I know you can do it."

She waved him off. Noah wasn't angry, he was never really angry at her. But in the back of her mind she knew she'd be embarrassed once she sobered up and so she slid to the couch's edge and looked for her keys. Noah shuffled around the coffee table, a heavy and intricately designed piece of furniture that Ellie wondered if it was worth something. It took up most of the room and Ellie could see herself reflected in the mahogany finish. She leaned further away from the couch until her nose almost touched the surface.

"I have some long eyelashes," Ellie said.

"You have some work."

"Shmerk," Ellie mocked but dragged her purse from the floor. Her keys jingled sweetly from inside. The walk to the door wasn't difficult but as Noah held it open for her she felt the muddy sensation of tears building in her throat. She craned her neck to thank Noah. He was so tall that the top half of his face escaped the evening sunlight, the

leftover rays sliced across his face. His posture impressed Ellie, like he was being pulled back with a string. He was self-conscious about his hands though, which dangled awkwardly from his wrists. Ellie wished she could take up so much space.

“You were just telling me how you need to stop being late.”

“I know. You’re right. I keep...whatever.” She fingered her keys and ignored the pressure that ballooned under her skin. A mosquito buzzed in front of her and the porch swing whistled in the breeze. Noah’s neighborhood was filled with families, Ellie had seen kids play in the yards on weekends. But during the week everything was tired and muted. A man across the street wound up his garden hose snaking across the grass before he dragged two small bikes back to the garage. Sunlight pierced through the neighborhood’s cracks.

“You can always quit you know.”

Ellie cringed, “I’m out of practice. I don’t know how to start looking for real jobs and my resume is a mess.”

Noah let the screen door close and leaned on the mesh divide, straining the material. “Or...you could come with me to the test prep thing.”

“Thanks. I’m good.”

“Come on. My usual study partner is going through some kind of soul searching phase and doesn’t want to go to law school anymore.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“But I’m all alone now.”

She shook her head and, careful not to miss the step, Ellie descended the porch and walked around the broken concrete on the way to her car. She didn’t want to have this conversation again, sober or high. The more she said “no,” the more final it felt, and while she appreciated that finality she also didn’t like confronting the emptiness that opened up in front of her. She settled into her car and saw the porch light flicker on as she drove away.

Her job at the call center was awful, but Ellie didn’t want to take the LSAT again. Even though she’d received an average score and she knew she could get into plenty of schools, the score had sat on the page so unassuming, mundane. Ellie thought how many hours she and Noah studied, how her hand cramped from the practice exercises. When she finally finished the test she stood up so fast she banged her knee against the table, creating a perfectly round bruise.

To totally immerse herself like that and then come up so underwhelmed was sickening. What once motivated her now felt like a leech: the longer she stared at that score, the more it drained her. After, Ellie had watched the dates on the calendar, walked through the days steadily until the deadlines to apply for schools passed.

But she missed libraries. She missed wearing a suit and using expensive leave-in conditioner to smooth her hair into a low bun. Her internships in college had forced her to wake up at four so she could walk into the office by six. She did little more than run errands but she loved holding paper fresh from the printer and imagining the ideas

resting between them. Patent law had been the plan. She imagined an improved tool for Lasik surgery or new ways to download music. They were like movies, some lucrative blockbusters and others forgotten indies. But their inventions unfolded in a dark intimacy that gave her the opportunity to watch them expand.

She hit a pothole and gripped the steering wheel as the car rattled. Her office, a pizza box-shaped building, appeared behind the oncology office. There were no windows and it cast a looming, heavy presence that weighed Ellie down. She parked in the lot across from the advanced paychecks office and rubbed her eyes. She was late again but couldn't get herself to walk into Vital Tone Research Association. She was barely able to do it when she interviewed, but they hired quickly and often and at the time she didn't think she could afford to wait for something better.

She tried to slip in without interrupting her boss' opening announcements, but the sudden light and fresh air distracted Serenity, who stopped speaking and glared at Ellie until she was sitting at her desk.

"Anyway," Serenity called out, "you'll be pleased to know these surveys last ten instead of twenty minutes." She looked at her clipboard and Ellie readjusted her chair's height from the previous shift. "And please limit your bathroom breaks. Obviously you can go but it shouldn't take you more than five minutes."

Chairs squealed and headsets clattered once Serenity finished. The woman next to Ellie leaned back and whispered, "I hate the sports ones. A caller laughed at me

during the last one because I said 'break' instead of 'halftime.' What difference does it make?"

"I had someone ask me my opinion on their March Madness bracket once," Ellie frowned, "he kept saying I was his lucky charm."

The room fell silent as people studied their practice surveys for Freeman Sports Network until a man across the room began first in a low, calm voice. Ellie scrolled through the list of phone numbers in the Excel document, grateful her area code wasn't among them. She blinked and pressed her fingers against her cheeks, aware her high was disappearing.

A man answered on her sixth try. Loud music thumped in the background.

"Hello?"

"Hi. My name is Ellie," she leaned forward in her cubicle, "I'm calling on behalf of-"

"What's your name?"

"Ellie, sir. I'm sorry. I'm calling on behalf of Vital Tone Research Association and I was wondering-"

"Ellie. Huh. That's a sexy name."

A woman in the background laughed, soon overpowered by other voices. Ellie focused, taking apart the layers and listened to the most important things. She wasn't allowed to hang up on him unless he swore or started yelling. Callers like this were

normal but she struggled with the idea of growing used to them, despite what others advised in the break room. He's a number, they told her, he'll make a good story later. But still her frustration mounted as she pressed her headphones against her ears.

"Sir, how would you rate your satisfaction with your local sports provider?"

"Ellie, you sound tense. Relax." He laughed.

"On a scale of one to ten-" she trailed off as the man began to argue with someone and his voice grew distant. As she listened to the man call his friend name she debated if she should interrupt. It was a stupid survey about sports channels, but if she filled her quota she could go home early. She was about to try one more time when the man yelled "bye lady!" and the line went dead.

"Jesus Christ," Ellie muttered and pulled her headset off so it looped around her neck. Her neighbor glanced around the wall again and looked like she was about to say something when someone answered her call. Ellie closed her eyes and tried to turn the surrounding voices into white noise. When she opened them, Serenity was standing over her.

"Come to my office, please."

Ellie waited five seconds before she followed her boss down the row.

She'd been in Serenity's office twice before. Once when she interviewed, and a second when she got put on probation for not extending sympathies to a man who lost his mother-in-law. She had sat in the stiff chair and listened to Serenity for ten minutes

about what etiquette dictates in times of loss. Ellie agreed but had a hard time explaining why she felt uncomfortable inserting “I’m sorry for your loss” between questions about internet speed. Especially after Serenity played the recording and Ellie had to stomach the sound of her own voice.

The office walls were covered in dark cherry colored paneling. Ellie sat in the same chair and tried to look relaxed, watching the thin lines that ran through the panels to imitate wood. Serenity stood out, always awash in bright colors, scarves, and tinkling jewelry. She pushed aside her blonde hair and cleared her throat.

“Do you remember the first survey you did today?”

Ellie made a point to look at the clock to her right, “the one five minutes ago? Yes.”

“Do you remember anything specific about it? Why it might lead me to call you in here?”

“I, I think I may have said ‘hi’ instead of ‘hello.’”

Serenity straightened a picture frame on her desk. Ellie imagined it still held the stock photo. “Your tone. You snapped at him when he didn’t answer the first time.”

“He didn’t answer at all.”

“Ellie, it is your job to maintain a pleasant demeanor over the phone.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t realize that I-“

“You’ve also been repeatedly late over the last month and I’m worried I’ve been giving you too many chances.”

Ellie’s instinct was to say yes, you have been, and it seemed strange she wasn’t already on probation. Unless she was and she had forgotten. She picked at a loose thread in the chair’s arm before pulling her hands into her lap.

“I think it may be best if we brought an end to your time here.”

Ellie froze, “My time...”

Serenity elaborated on protocol. As she gestured a blue feathery earring caught in her hair. Ellie spread her fingers over her knees, feeling the bones shift underneath her skin. There was no art on the walls, only the clock. And she wondered if people passing by could see her through the skinny windows on either side of the door.

“Wait. I’m sorry. I know I’ve been late but what other rules have I broken?”

“You were aggressive with a caller. Freeman Sports is one of our biggest clients, we’re lucky to have them. But your tone put our relationship with them at risk.”

“So don’t play my recording. You don’t have to give it to them.”

“Ellie,” Serenity sighed, “That’s not the point. You’ve been an...exciting addition to our team but I think you would do better somewhere else.”

The clock ticked and she scratched her ear, catching a whiff of smoke on her sister’s sweatshirt. Heat crept up her neck. She’d never been fired before and she was

surprised she didn't feel like crying. She felt preoccupied by how big her sister's sweatshirt was, the sleeves of which sagged under her arms.

"Can I at least finish out the pay period?"

Serenity paused, "I suppose. But I think you should leave for the day."

You suppose, though Ellie, what a joke. Don't bend over backwards for *me*.

Stiffness layered over her spine so she was sure her bones would snap if she stood too fast. A wave of dizziness washed over her as she exited the office, ignoring Serenity's goodbyes. She walked through the hallway, the padded grey walls interrupted with a few colored flyers. She glanced at one selling a couch before pushing open the door.

This is funny, she told herself as she unlocked the car. Or, it will be funny. One day she'll tell this story and laugh.

Andrea

The post office was much larger than the one in her neighborhood, and she was unfamiliar with the hallways directions and warming skylights. Steps echoed in the spacious room but she couldn't find the bodies attached to them. Behind the counter, something crashed and while she pressed her palm against her chest to steady her heart, the postman didn't seem to notice.

A middle-aged woman stood in front of her and asked about patriotic stamps. Andrea clung to her purse and studied the woman's brown roots growing through her blonde hair, feeling perspiration gather along her lower back. She turned to the wall covered in flat rate boxes before the woman could catch her staring. She chose one, pushed it into a shape, and placed the still-wrapped vibrator in the middle of the box. But even with the scarf as a buffer, there was still a lot of room and Andrea worried the vibrator would rattle around.

The post office idea had appeared slowly as she paced her apartment throughout the day. She had refused to detach herself from her purse as she half-heartedly began taking books off her shelf and clothes from her closet. She was replacing the water in Carl's cage and watching her pet snake's flushed red body slide over the woodchips. The lamp in the corner glowed faintly orange and she dipped her hand in so her fingers could glide over his skin. Carl rarely responded to her touch but at

that moment she felt her chest seize in anger. She was there, living and breathing and...present and still he would not look up. She had wrapped her hands around the corners of his glass box and was about to shake it just enough to alert him a little.

The idea came to her from wanting to get rid of everything, not necessarily starting over but at least using the absence to make some noise. It seemed more appealing as she checked the clock and saw she had thirty minutes to get across town, wanting to limit her chances of running into someone she knew. Adrenaline kept her moving as she willed the red traffic lights to change and let her through. Claire and Lydia didn't know she could be mean, they wouldn't have left her like this if they had, but now they'd know.

She wanted to surprise them too.

But now the woman standing in front of her forced Andrea to think. She swallowed and wondered what she'd say to Charlotte, which seemed like an inevitable conversation since they'd be sharing a room again. She wasn't worried about Ellie, especially since she'd grown so quiet and avoidant. But she always got the sense Charlotte knew more than her anyway and it was easy to feel her judgement.

Andrea took a piece of scrap paper from the counter and wrote *Been thinking about you lately. Love, Claire*. The pen ripped the paper but she ignored it and placed it over the scarf.

Even though Andrea saw the whole Claire and Lydia thing as unfair, she could already see Charlotte's irritated look if Andrea tried to vouch for herself. Even now she

felt defensive, standing in the post office and clutching the packing tape, desperate to prove it would work even if she didn't exactly know what "work" was. She closed the box and taped it shut, not noticing the woman had walked away and when she looked up she met the postman's gaze. She blushed and carried the box over with both hands, careful not to move what was inside.

"Valuables? Fragile items? Do you need insurance?" he asked.

"What? Uh, maybe. No, it's fine."

He asked for an address and pointed to the small screen at the counter's edge.

"Enter it there, ma'am."

Andrea froze. A crack ran along the corner and visible fingerprints spotted the surface, "Right. Yes. That seems important."

The postman chuckled, "Don't use the post office much, do you young lady?"

"I need to...look it up. Hold on."

The internet dragged and Andrea heard someone approach behind her as the Fraternity's contact page slowly lowered over her phone's screen. Distracted by the presence behind her she turned and saw someone else fall into the line. Of course people would show up when she needed time.

"I just need stamps," she heard one of them whisper.

“I’m almost done. Here.” She jabbed her finger against the dirty screen, unsure if Claire’s ex-boyfriend preferred his full name or nickname, wondering if he’d even receive it if it was his nickname and so wrote *Christopher* and pushed enter. The postman tossed the box on the conveyor belt behind him.

“Anything else?”

“No. I’m good.”

Andrea felt a jolt of energy as she pushed the door open with both hands and hurried into the parking lot. Pink light filtered over the sky as the sun descended between the buildings. Its rays reflected off a nearby bank and Andrea had to squint as she walked to her car. As she stretched the distance between herself and the post office, her mind filled with all the things she had to do: pack, write a lab report, call her mom.

At two in the morning Andrea stared at the ceiling and made shapes with shadows. The mattress felt too firm and she could hear the kitchen sink dripping on the other side of the wall. Her mom would tell her to close her eyes and think about something else, but she also told Andrea she had a one-track mind. She focused, consciously or unconsciously, on one thing and let it act as the force for her mood. Growing up people said she was stubborn as both an insult and a compliment, and over time Andrea felt like it held her back but she didn’t know how to change.

At least, she thought, I'm not like Ellie, who gave up and let things happen to her instead of doing something about them. She worried moving back to their mom's had made Ellie even more okay with the changes that had occurred in her life. Sometimes she reminded Andrea of Carl, the way he wound himself in a slow, tight circle in his corner.

The sink dripped and Andrea threw off her blanket and rushed out to shove the faucet into place. She twisted the lever until the water stopped, but stayed and stared until she saw the last drip break loose from the faucet's lip. The microwave clock flashed and she decided then to give up on sleep.

She found a bag of popcorn, ripped the plastic and stopped, catching wisps of someone's snoring in the other room. The half-opened bag hung between her hands as she tried to determine if the sound could be the upstairs neighbor. She'd grown used to an empty apartment at night but instead of feeling like they shared the space, she worried she had intruded.

"Don't be stupid. You leave here more than they do," she whispered, tossed the bag into the microwave, and pressed start. It unfurled slowly and then all at once. As she watched her vague reflection and pulled her fingers through her tangled hair. She needed a haircut.

Months ago she would have opened the door before the timer went off, careful not to alarm her roommates. But now she didn't care and she doubted anyone would confront her about it anyway. It gave three loud beeps and Andrea let them all play out.

Andrea woke up first and snuck out early, planning on walking to campus. As she climbed out of her basement apartment and faced the rising sun she felt calmer than she had in days. Paranoia over the vibrator lingered over her but she told herself there wasn't anything she could do about it now.

The air was already muggy but the streets still shone with dew and glittered with sunlight. The cloudless sky looked nice but the longer she studied it, the more it looked sugary, like cotton candy, and Andrea kept her gaze on the path in front of her. Cars honked beside her and inched forward in the rush hour traffic. Her phone vibrated and when she pulled it from her pocket she saw Ellie's picture on the screen, her eyes wide with surprise when Andrea had snuck up on her in the middle of eating a Christmas cookie. She wore a tight green sweater, her blonde hair curled against her shoulders.

"Mom says you're coming back," Ellie said without a hello.

"God. Do you and mom ever not talk?"

"Are you planning to share Charlotte's room?"

"And yours too apparently. You're there too, right?" Andrea snapped.

"My lease doesn't expire for a few days, so I still have some stuff at the apartment but, yes, I'm at mom's."

The silence grew into a standoff. There were only two bedrooms and they had barely made it work before. It was better than the apartment they got right after the divorce, which had been falling apart and Andrea often woke up with crumbled dry wall

in her hair. But Ellie was a neat freak, and complained constantly about Andrea's scattered shoes and socks. Andrea always thought they should accept each other's differences and ignored Ellie's complaints. That, and Ellie usually ended up cleaning if Andrea waited long enough. She debated suggesting Ellie share their mom's room but it seemed wrong to force their mom into something like that.

"Do you ever get the sense mom's been feeling overwhelmed lately?" Andrea asked.

"I don't think she really wants us around," Ellie replied, "She says she's fine with it – she bought you new sheets by the way – but you know mom."

Andrea crossed the street and stepped around orange tape blocking a hole in the sidewalk. She did know their mom but she'd always been generous, happy to help. And Andrea didn't intend to lean that hard on her once she moved back. She made a mental not to keep her stay short and be gone by the beginning of fall semester.

Ellie's sigh rippled through the speaker, "Listen, I know it's my fault. I'll...figure something out."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Andrea looked at the sky, wanting the sun to warm her face. She felt guilty for snapping at her sister. "I'll be back this weekend. Maybe we could cook mom dinner."

"She'd like that."

Andrea inhaled the dusty, fragrant air as she approached the biology building. Some kind of purple flowers lined the path and she made sure to keep from brushing against their fragile-looking petals. Once she climbed the stairs she stood to the side while others walked past her. The cool air from inside brushed against her back.

“I should go,” Andrea switched her phone to her other ear, “only one more week of class but I could still fail if I don’t show up...” she trailed off with a small laugh, wanting Ellie to smile or exhale or something. Remember, maybe, how odd things could be sometimes.

Charlotte

At lunch on Thursday someone had tried to microwave something fishy and the smell was making Charlotte sick. She turned away, using her hair to block the stench but the combination of her strawberry shampoo and the sophomore's leftovers made her stomach turn.

"Why do we sit here?" Charlotte asked. Joy looked down the short distance to the appliance and shrugged.

"It seemed convenient at the time."

"Have either of us ever used the microwave?"

Joy took a bit of her sandwich while Charlotte scanned the row of floor-to-ceiling windows on the other side of the cafeteria. "We could move over there."

"Eh. It's almost summer. We'll find a new spot next year."

On the far side of their table a group of boys laughed, their shaggy heads bowed over someone's phone. One of them muffled the techno music with his hand when a lunch supervisor walked by. She stopped and eyed their group and they assumed a casual arrangement of hands and gazes, occasionally looking up at each other to smirk. The supervisor sighed and kept walking. The boys barely waited thirty seconds before placing the phone on the table again.

“Have you seen this?” one asked when he caught Charlotte’s stare. He was the only one with a closely-shaved head and she was pretty sure he was a freshman, although he looked too old. She hesitated before nodding.

“Isn’t it hilarious? He’s so gay.”

Joy avoided Charlotte and focused on putting her crust back into her plastic sandwich bag. They’d both seen the videos of Travis and a few had made the rounds multiple times at St. Wensc. Charlotte didn’t know how they knew Travis, but Lincoln was small enough that he probably had a cousin that went here or a friend of a friend. One video manipulated Travis’ head so it inflated while his voice grew shrill. A few had crude animations featuring his megaphone, but the most popular seemed to be one called “Lethal Remix” where someone had rearranged his speech into a rap.

Charlotte wanted to stand up for him but wasn’t sure how to. She felt stupid since everyone else except her had noticed how lackluster the protest had gone. She wished she had listened to Theo and let her expectations fall even a little so that she didn’t flinch so hard every time she heard the videos.

“Ignore them,” Joy said and slid her palm over the table to collect crumbs, “Hey, are you busy tomorrow? We should have a movie night.”

“Tomorrow? I think Theo mentioned a new project that I wanted to check out.”

“Oh.”

“You can come too.”

Joy shook her head, “Those meetings are so boring. Do you remember that one girl who was hanging around for a while, Allie? Is she still there?”

“Um, yeah. I think. I haven’t noticed.”

Students finished with their lunch dropped their trays on the counter and the clattering sound echoed through the room. Charlotte looked at her own lunch, which looked more like a snack spread instead of a meal. It had been a while since anyone had gone grocery shopping and she had had to make a lunch from stale pretzels and baby carrots. Her lunch account had run out weeks ago and she didn’t want to bother her mom about it so close to the end of the year.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a good horror movie marathon!”

“I know. We’ll do it again.”

Joy pulled her curly hair behind her shoulders, “I know I’ve asked this before but are you *sure* you don’t like Theo?”

“Joy...”

“I know, I know. But sometimes I get the impression you’re not...telling me the truth,” she held up her hands as Charlotte protested, “not that I think you’re lying to me. But, you know, maybe you just haven’t admitted it to yourself yet.”

Charlotte huffed and dug into her clementine, the skin pushing up her nail. She’d been through this with Joy before, with the others at Full Moon too. If she was being honest with herself, sure, Theo was cute. She liked skinny, sort of nerdy-looking guys.

But liking him felt inconvenient and contrived, like people expected it and so she should.

But even though she found Theo smart and interesting, she often left their conversations feeling empty, like she'd been waiting for him to say something a little more engaging or a little more aware. *Almost*, wanted to tell him, *you've almost got it*. But if she did tell him that she wasn't sure she could answer what he was almost close to. She kept going to Full Moon Coffee to find the answer for herself just as much for Theo.

Charlotte looked at her *Spongebob* watch and saw lunch would be over soon.

"Did I tell you Andrea is moving back?"

"What? No! Can she do that?"

"According to my mom she can," Charlotte put the rest of her uneaten lunch in her backpack. "Maybe we could watch *Carrie* this weekend. Andrea's moving back and I think my mom is having her friends over too. So I'll need some space."

The bell rang and the voices around them expanded. Joy yelled over the noise and hoisted her own bag over her shoulder.

"Ok! That sounds fun!"

They followed the crowd into the narrow halls and waited for bodies to move.

"Wait, your mom is having people over *and* Andrea is moving back?"

Charlotte leaned her head against the stone wall, feeling the grooves against her skull. "I know, right?"

By the end of the day Charlotte worried her room was already littered with Andrea's textbooks and hair products. But even worse, she worried Andrea would take her bed despite the extra mattress still lying next to the wall. Charlotte's was next to a window and had a bed frame and she wouldn't put it past her sister to steal it. She bounced on her toes, impatient for Ellie to arrive as she scanned the minivans and SUVs in the pickup line. When her sister finally appeared, Charlotte asked her if she could drive instead so they could get home faster.

"It's *my* car," was Ellie's response. They drove the speed limit and stopped at yellow lights. When they reached the house, Charlotte raced to their room. Andrea's backpack sat in the middle of the tan carpet, next to a pile of sweaters and soap bottles.

When they all first moved in their room looked larger because of the two wide windows covering the wall and the branches arched across the glass created a tree house effect. Ellie and Charlotte lined their bed's tops against the windows while Andrea's mattress lined the opposite side. The room had never looked cohesive but looked especially chaotic after Ellie moved out before college. Charlotte had taken ownership of the room, anxious for when Andrea would also go to college and finally give Charlotte her own space. She had moved Andrea's books to the floor and used the bookcase for her own boxes and pictures and notebooks. Her past interests laid piled in the corners: her knitting, Broadway soundtracks, watercolors, and an old sewing machine her grandmother had given her and everyone was pretty sure was broken.

Andrea stood with one hand on her hip and gestured with the other at the beds.

“So how long is Ellie planning on staying here?”

With her own backpack still on, Charlotte sat on her bed and spread her hands over her purple quilt. “I actually don’t see her much. She’s at Noah’s a lot.”

“Oh. Does she have any plans...”

“I don’t know. She’s here until she decides not to be. Who knows what’s happening anymore?”

Charlotte was disappointed with Ellie, but Andrea had started to treat their sister’s recent changes with surprising harshness. They both got asked “how’s your big sister?” a lot but Ellie was twenty-five, eight years old than Charlotte and the question often felt abstract. Ellie was too far away to think of as aspirational. Andrea, however, seemed personally affected. Andrea picked up a shampoo bottle, shook it, and tossed it back in her pile of stuff.

A single clear path ran from the room’s center to the door and Charlotte began to feel claustrophobic the longer she looked at it. She slid off her backpack and twisted her spine until she felt it pop, but still felt tense. She pushed her backpack onto the floor with a *thud* and suddenly remembered she had stashed her pretzels in it. The sudden realization that they were probably crushed now made her eyes itch. Andrea rambled on about her finals and the relief and how hot it already was, but Charlotte wasn’t listening. She pressed her palms into her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to shake off her disappointment.

She was supposed to have the room to herself by now.

When she opened them, Andrea had disappeared into the bathroom but soon returned holding a glass cage. Carl's head moved against the side.

"No."

"It's fine. Calm down." Andrea pushed aside the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* to make room on the bookcase and wedged Carl next to a stack of spiral notebooks. It was too wide for the shelf and the front end of the cage came off the ledge.

Charlotte couldn't stifle the whine that escaped her voice, "Andrea come on. That thing is going to make the room smell. And I don't want to have to see that when I wake up at night."

"Why are you waking up at night? Don't drink water after ten or don't look at him. It's not hard." She tested the lid, wiggling it to make sure it was secure. "Anyway, get over yourself. I can't have you mad at me too."

Carl had gone missing once last year and Andrea didn't tell her roommates. She said that she had planned on telling them if Carl wasn't found by the end of the week, claiming she didn't want to freak Claire and Lydia out. But Lydia had found him curled up on the top rack of their dishwasher before Andrea got the chance.

Andrea told the story with a 'can you believe it?' tone and filled in the pauses with her own laughter. But she always left out how mad Claire and Lydia were and how three days into Carl's disappearance, she had cried because she worried he was dead.

While Andrea left to find the snake's food, Charlotte approached the cage with caution, glimpsing his curves before turning away disgusted. Andrea would insist he was small, that Charlotte would get used to him. But that wasn't the point. Charlotte felt cheated. Why was she able to guess Andrea's argument but Andrea couldn't guess hers? It was more likely that Andrea could guess but just didn't care.

Later at work Charlotte counted the empty chairs. Three hours into her five hour shift she had rung up two orders and both of them had been on the same ticket. A mom and her son wanted cheeseburgers with no pickles, and the boy had stuck out his tongue when his mom told him he had to get milk instead of pop. Charlotte leaned her elbows on the counter and stared at the florescent light that bounced off the "Italian" wall art. She leaned against her hand until her wrist felt sore and her vision blurred.

"Look alive, Char," her manager, a senior from the high school up north, said without looking up from his Sudoku puzzle.

"Can I vacuum?"

"Closing tasks don't start until ten forty-five."

Charlotte picked at the plastic covering the register's keyboard. It was so dark outside with no cars to illuminate the parking lot. Even the kitchen was quiet.

"Everyone hates us. No one who lives here wants a burger a nine-thirty. Or ever."

“You just helped a customer.”

“One. And that was forever ago.”

Her manager snorted but kept doing his puzzle. Charlotte took his lack of response as agreement. No one by the new developments and the nice golf course wanted their food. She wished she'd tried to get a job closer to the University, but she figured she couldn't afford to park downtown anyway.

The bell over the door jingled and Charlotte saw Theo step in and blink in the harsh light. She didn't say anything while he shoved his hands in his pockets and ambled to her station. She adjusted the bright yellow ballcap, uncertain if she was more embarrassed by her work or school uniform.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hello.”

“What's good here?”

“Nothing.”

Her manager sighed and tucked the Sudoku in his back pocket, “Maybe you're the reason no one is coming,” he told Charlotte before going to the back.

“Ignore him.” It shocked her how much taller Theo looked and the overhead lights poured down his cheeks, giving his skin a waxy sheen. “Why are you here?”

“Thought I owed you since you helped me out the other day. Did you read the article I sent you?” He asked, referring to the tiny article about their “immature act of vandalism.” It wasn’t even two hundred words but Charlotte supposed it was better than what Travis had received.

“It was fine I guess.”

“That just means they’re trying to compose themselves. They’re trying to minimize the effect, but I know we freaked them out.”

“Right. Of course.”

Silence followed. Theo shifted from one foot to the other while Charlotte felt like she should be entertaining him. He had never visited before and it felt weird interacting with Theo at her work. A burst of laughter came from the kitchen, highlighting the unevenness she felt. A part of her wanted to express her concern and tell Theo that the project had proven useless. But after dealing with Andrea she wanted to avoid any chance of Theo launching into a speech about teamwork and perseverance. Once he started it was difficult to get him to stop and she didn’t have the energy.

It wasn’t that she regretted what they did. But after she had read the article the whole thing seemed like a waste of time. When he first told her about it, the idea felt exciting and she was looking forward to getting her hands dirty instead of just standing in a protest and going home once it got too hot outside. But now she was mad at herself for not realizing how, well, immature it had been. No one was going to notice. The lack of coverage wasn’t from fear like Theo insisted, but from disinterest.

“Doesn’t it seem, I don’t know, a little naïve?” Charlotte asked.

“What? No way.” Theo narrowed his eyes, “You know, I sort of wished we had been caught because then they would have had to take a statement from us. That would’ve been cool and then people could put an actual face with the words.”

“I don’t want to be caught.”

“Well, no. No one does really. But for something small like that we would’ve been fine overall. But even if we weren’t we have to make sacrifices for what we believe in. I think maybe if we-“

Charlotte shook her head, cutting him off. She opened the mini-fridge under the counter and pulled out a small bottle of chocolate milk. Theo glanced at the manager’s direction. “Don’t worry. It’s expired anyway.”

Ellie

Ellie leaned against her old apartment's front door, the wood sticky beneath her skin. Her neighbors had begun dinner and the smells wafted through the hall behind her. She pushed herself forward and wandered from room to room, astonished by the emptiness. She hadn't thought she owned that much but the rooms felt confrontational in their starkness. But mostly, she noticed it the quiet. She checked her phone and saw she had two hours left before her landlord said he'd change the locks, and Ellie was determined to use every minute.

In the main room she found the hole in the wall where she had attempted to hang a picture. The nail had ripped through the drywall as soon as she stepped back to examine the frame, and while the hole wasn't large, money would be taken from her deposit for repairs. She smoothed her hand over it and a piece of paint chipped fell into her hand. She studied it a moment, thinking it looked a little like a teapot, before crumbling it between her fingers.

She used to be so frugal, some might've called her stingy. But she'd gotten neglectful. It all happened so fast, a little stressful but she wasn't concerned at first, but then one day it was all terrible. All her money was gone.

She jumped when Noah knocked and leaned his head in. "Where do you need me?"

“There’s just that,” she pointed to the round dining table, “and the dresser in the bedroom.”

“The day has finally come.”

“Yeah, well, this place wasn’t that great anyway.” Ellie had wanted to throw everything in the dumpster but at the last minute she realized she couldn’t throw away her entire life. She needed to take up space at her mom’s, hoping she could crowd herself out.

She walked to the table and helped Noah lift, “I can’t wait to buy *sets*, you know? I need to replace all my mismatched, dollar store, Goodwill furniture with some Ethan Allen or Pottery Barn.”

“You’re not really the Pottery Barn type.”

“Maybe I could be.”

It was difficult to maneuver the table through the door and down the stairs, and Ellie struggled to keep her grasp on the round edges. She felt her arms shake as Noah told a story about helping a friend move in college. They ended up tossing a futon off the balcony from three stories, but missed the dumpster, almost landing on an unsuspecting father below.

“Shit, Noah. That could’ve been really bad.”

“But it wasn’t! The worst was the sound which was this really loud smack.” They reached the bottom and hobbled to Noah’s truck, lowering it carefully into the bed. “Where did you get this thing? I still use that card table from Walmart.”

“My mom has a weird collection of furniture. People just sort of give her stuff they don’t want. But it all looks like this.” She smoothed her palm over a deep gash in the black paint that revealed the splintered wood underneath. It had only come with two chairs, which were back at her mom’s already and looked less beat up.

“Ok. What’s next?”

Ellie looked back at the building – a dry, sandy-colored complex with wooden balconies and sporadic satellite dishes. She hesitated.

“You’re going to be fine. You’ve always been good at coming back from much worse. This is no different.”

She nodded but didn’t have an answer, and walked back without looking at Noah’s face. It wasn’t his fault he was so tall, but she didn’t want to see him looking down at her. She ached and had to use the railing to yank herself up the stairs and back to her bedroom for that dresser.

It was the bedroom that had sold Ellie on the apartment. Small, perfectly square, except for the wall facing the parking lot, which leaned back into the room and created a half a-frame. There were two windows, one on the wall and one above. Instead of using a bedframe, Ellie had tucked her mattress under the slope using the

small window like a headboard so she could look up through the window at night. It was frightening at first, and disorienting, but soon she found that her breath became steadier the longer she looked through the glass.

The dresser, a gift from her grandmother on her dad's side, was still shoved in the corner. It was heavy, made out of dark, seductive wood that didn't fit Ellie's aesthetic at all. But it was free and she'd been using it to store her sweaters. Intricate floral engravings surrounded the knobs, growing outward to the corners. Ellie used to run her fingers in the grooves and imagine tiny, precise veins carrying water through the petals. The images' sharpness had worn away over time, but the design remained hypnotic.

But the mutilated bottom drawer eliminated any chance of a decent resale. Ellie and Noah steadied it the best they could between them and dragged it to the truck. He didn't ask about the drawer even as it slid off its track halfway down the stairs. Ellie suspected Noah knew something had happened, but she was grateful that he kept his questions to himself.

She had told her mom she'd chosen not to renew her lease, but that wasn't true. The day she received her eviction notice she had laid on the floor in front of the dresser, watching the lines in the wood swirl around themselves. She could hear a buzzing sound. It was a low, calm hum that rose up and around her ears in an even wave. She felt immersed in the sound and soon overwhelmed. In an effort to escape it she ran to the living room, but it followed her.

The sound spiraled into a higher pitch and she thought there must be a bee or a wasp trapped in her apartment. Ellie picked up a shoe by the door and followed the sound but couldn't find its origin. As she moved in and out of rooms she began to feel the humming behind her eyes. Her head vibrated. A small breeze made her twist her head back in shock. Had the insect landed on her? She pulled her hair until her scalp hurt.

With one hand still holding the shoe, she had snuck back into her room and the buzzing jumping in frazzled chaos when she looked at the dresser. Already colonies had set up their homes in the corners, their bodies were piled on top of each other, legs crawled into crevices.

Ellie had run to the kitchen and found a knife. When she returned she started with the flowers, telling herself if there were no flowers, then the sound would stop. She scraped the knife's edge against the curved petals. The defacement sounded thin, like she was using her fingernail instead of a knife. She dragged it in longer lines and dug into the wood until the dresser looked like something had been clawing to get out.

Ellie laid on Charlotte's bed with her feet propped up on the window frame.

"What are you doing?" Charlotte asked when she entered. She picked up one of her work polos from a pile near her bed and tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

"Your bed gets better sun."

“Open your blinds.”

Ellie kept looking at the ceiling and ignored Charlotte’s grumbling. More than once Charlotte had ended up sleeping in Ellie’s bed anyway since she had the softer mattress.

“Do you work tonight?” Ellie asked.

“No. Not until this weekend. I’m not getting as many shifts as I wanted.”

“Maybe wait until summer really starts.”

“I guess,” she reached toward the ceiling so her black t-shirt rode up and exposed her pale stomach. “Are you having out with Noah tonight?”

“He has a...test prep thing.”

“Oh.” Charlotte looked around, “Have you seen my blue sweatshirt? Joy’s having a bonfire tonight.”

“I haven’t.”

Charlotte sat on the edge of the bed. No one else was home and a strong wind interrupted their silence. Ellie placed her hands on her own stomach and felt them move as she breathed, her head rolling as Charlotte’s weight pushed the mattress down. It was nice having her there.

“How is Noah?”

“He’s good. But he’s just so...positive. And things don’t feel that positive right now.”

“I know.”

Ellie twisted the edge of her shirt around her finger. She thought about asking where Andrea was but she didn’t want to give Charlotte the impression that she wasn’t good enough. They’d had the room to themselves for almost a full month but Ellie felt guilty for not taking advantage of it. She rolled over and watched Charlotte’s black converse swing slowly over the floor.

“I got fired,” Ellie said.

Charlotte turned and looked at her with wide, grey eyes. She opened her mouth but seemed to reconsider what she wanted to say.

“I get to finish the pay period but after Friday, I don’t work at the call center anymore. Then after that, I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

“You could go back to school.”

Ellie snorted. Charlotte sounded serious but it sounded so much like a punchline at this point. She covered her face and felt the mattress shift as Charlotte stood. She felt Charlotte standing over her and when she moved her hands she saw her younger sister standing over her, arms dangling at her sides, and her blonde hair framing her face. Her eyebrows and eyelashes her so blonde they looked translucent, and even though her

thin frame still had remnants of baby fat, Ellie worried once she lost it, Charlotte would float away. Ellie pushed herself upright and blinked as the blood rushed from her head.

“I wish I could quit my job,” Charlotte’s voice sounded tilted, like she decided to change her tone halfway through, “the other day a group of boys came in and spilled their pop, blew straw wrappers at each other. One even sent back their food and then just left everything on their table.”

“People suck.”

“Yeah. People are the worst.”

“But it could be worse, and soon you’ll get to leave for college.”

Charlotte nodded. “Just so you know mom seems okay with you being here.”

“I can’t stay here. If anything, I feel stupid.”

“But why look for a job you’re going to hate just so you can move again?”

Charlotte kept searching for her sweatshirt and wind rattled the windows, fiercer this time. Ellie felt lighter than when she’d been with Noah and hunger rippled through her. She clutched her stomach when Charlotte laughed. The tree branch scratched the window.

“Joy’s having a bonfire in *this*?”

“I guess. Oh hey, mom’s friend Trudy or Theresa or...I forget her name...she has a baby and is looking for a nanny.”

“I’m not great with kids.”

“Who is? Remember, people suck.”

Ellie had babysat a total of two times in her life and stopped after one girl jumped off the kitchen counter and broke her arm so severely, the bone stuck through her skin. But Ellie had been more traumatized by the mother arriving at the hospital in tears than the injury itself. Once the little girl had skipped out in a pink cast, Ellie told the mom she couldn’t babysit anymore.

“How old?”

“I think at least a year. Sorry, thirteen months,” Charlotte rolled her eyes, “you can ask at that movie thing mom’s having this weekend. I’m sure she’ll be here.”

“Movie thing?”

“Mom’s having her friends over to watch a movie. Or read a book. They seem to always end up doing both.”

Ellie agreed and Charlotte looked satisfied before rummaging through her laundry, asking Ellie her opinion whether it’d be smart to wear jeans. A few stuffed animals sat in the corner, fallen like they had been tossed. Ellie hadn’t known Charlotte kept them but the sight was comforting.

Andrea

She decided to move in pieces like Claire instead of all at once like Lydia and dropped the laundry basket full of shoes at the bottom of her mom's stairs. Andrea huffed, her stairs now. She stretched her arms behind her and waited. It was a small house but there were enough sharp corners that it was easy to run into someone. Laughter drifted from upstairs and Andrea felt a pang of loneliness, wondering how she kept finding herself on the edges of these things. She left the basket on the floor and took the stairs two at a time.

"Hey," they said in unison. Charlotte was on the floor while Ellie sat cross-legged on the bed.

"Where's mom?"

"She's supposed to be off work soon," Ellie said.

Andrea checked on Carl, feeling Charlotte's eyes following her and sensing her frustration. Still, she couldn't tell if her anger had increased or if she was the same amount as usual. Sometimes it was best to wait Charlotte out. Carl looked at her before lying his head back down and closing his eyes.

"You like Carl, right Ellie?"

"He's fine. As long as I don't have to watch him eat."

“See?”

Charlotte growled and dug her heels into the carpet, “You didn’t even tell me. You just assumed I’d be okay with that thing in my bedroom.”

“You knew I had a snake! And it’s not just your bedroom.”

“It was.”

“What’d you say?”

Ellie stood, “Oh my god is this how it’s going to be all summer?”

Andrea crossed her arms and positioned herself in front of Carl, feeling protective. Ellie turned her palms down and smoothed the air, pleading them to keep from fighting when they’re mom got back. Andrea kicked off her sandals and followed the twinkle lights strung over Charlotte’s dresser until she felt the muscles in her jaw loosen.

“Are those new? I like them.”

Charlotte took a moment to answer. “Thanks. They were at Full Moon and someone said I could have them.”

“Why do you like that place so much? You’re not big on coffee.”

“They have good scones.” Charlotte reached for her phone charging near the wall and checked it. Light jumped over her face, almost hardened into a scowl. She

looked so serious for someone who liked twinkle lights. “And a part of me is hoping they might hire me if I stick around enough. I’ll probably get laid off soon.”

Ellie laughed, “You can’t get laid off. It’s not that kind of job.”

“Well it’s not getting fired is it? I’d have to do something wrong like steal or freak out at a customer.”

An awkward silence fell over them. Andrea looked between her two sisters. Ellie’s pale skin flushed, the color spilling down her cheeks and over her neck like a rash. Charlotte’s expression softened and set her phone down.

“What’s going on?” Andrea asked. Charlotte’s grey eyes darted to Ellie but no one spoke. Finally, Ellie pulled her hair so it fanned over her shoulders. She sucked her lips into a strange smile like she was trying to keep herself from saying something. Andrea’s stomach twisted as she noticed how much Ellie’s face had softened. Her once hollow cheeks were fuller and a thin sheen covered her blue eyes, making her look vulnerable. It ran against what she knew her sister to be: stronger, louder, steadier. Once, a long time ago, Andrea had read Ellie’s journal and the dark undertones and sharp tone didn’t scare her because they made sense. They matched Ellie’s angular frame in a way that convinced Andrea of Ellie’s dangerous streak. That her body was built for combat.

Now, Andrea couldn’t even imagine Ellie in-sync with basic human desires like hunger or rage.

"I got fired."

"Oh."

"Apparently my *tone* isn't appropriate. I'm insulting our clients."

Andrea studied the bed over Ellie's shoulder. The dark blue sheets had begun thinning in small patches and someone had shoved the comforter off the mattress and left it piled on the floor. Above them, the light was warm and soft, dimmed from one burned out bulb.

Andrea wanted to say *It's okay. We still love you*. She planned to say it sincerely with an edge of something that would make Ellie laugh and reply with a sarcastic *thanks*. But it seemed immature or silly and she couldn't unstick the words from her mouth. Ellie blinked and it struck Andrea that she might cry, and while she'd seen her sister cry before, it was confusing. Didn't Ellie hate that job? The Ellie she knew, the Ellie she liked best, was driven by these things. Andrea suddenly felt impatient. She closed her fists and thought maybe Ellie needed to be fired.

Their phones vibrated in a unified shock and relief filled Andrea, grateful for the change.

"Mom says set the table," Charlotte read.

"Well she wants you to peel potatoes."

Charlotte pushed past Andrea and led the way downstairs.

"Are you going to tell mom?" Andrea asked when they reached the kitchen.

"I think I have to."

Charlotte found a cutting board and filled a large pot of water to boil. She dragged a stepstool to search for a cookbook.

"So why are you back exactly?" Ellie plunked a bag of russet potatoes on the counter.

"Because Claire and Lydia hate me."

"Come on."

"Well it's not like they told me they wanted to move out. They abandoned me. Rejected me like trash."

"You're being dramatic."

Andrea held a knife and waited for Ellie to hand her the scrubbed potatoes. She thought about the box, maybe sitting on the back of some truck. Or, more likely, already at the frat house. She wondered if she drove past the house she could see it sitting on the wide stone porch. The small white package would look so unsuspecting, maybe someone wouldn't see it the first time.

"What's so funny?" Charlotte asked and Andrea realized too late she'd been smiling.

"Nothing." But her smile grew as she thought about Claire's ex, Christopher, opening the box. He'd be confused at first, but she was certain his face would break open in disgust. This was the boyfriend she broke up with for being "too traditional"

after all. The cutting board rattled as she sliced through a potato and she jumped as she felt the knife graze her thumb, but she was fine.

“I mailed Claire’s vibrator to her ex-boyfriend.”

The pause in activity didn’t surprise Andrea, but as the silence stretched she began to hope someone would just force a laugh to break it. She looked to Charlotte, hoping her rebel sister would approve but was met with an icy expression.

“You did...what?”

“I mailed Claire’s-“

“You stole Claire’s vibrator.”

They all froze when the front door slammed and Maggie’s voice ran through the house. Panic flashed over Charlotte’s face. Andrea held the knife poised in the air and prayed their mom hadn’t heard Charlotte say the word “vibrator.”

Maggie stood on the metal strip that divided the tile and the living room carpet. She wore a pretty blue wrap dress and her black lunch box dangled from her wrist. She had twisted her auburn hair in a loose knot, which Andrea thought must have been a last minute move between stoplights because it flopped to the side.

“What’s...going on?”

Andrea brushed the potato cubes into the pot of water and walked to the low table on the other side of the room. When no one answered Maggie threw up her hands.

“Alright. No one tell me.” But she smiled. Her shoes clicked over the tile when she went to hug Charlotte.

“Do we have garlic?” Charlotte asked once Maggie released her.

“I thought I bought some,” she rifled through the cabinets a moment, “hold on. Let me go change my clothes before I do anything else.”

They waited until Maggie’s steps made it all the way up the stairs before Charlotte whipped around and glared at Andrea, “you planned that.”

Andrea flicked through a pile of coupons, “Spare me, Morality Queen.” She had hoped Charlotte would’ve been the one to at least understand that she had to do something, even if she didn’t find it funny. Now Charlotte was upset and as Andrea studied an ad for laundry detergent, she didn’t think she was doing anything right. She had done it because Claire and Lydia had really hurt her and she wanted to hurt them back. But it was difficult to articulate the kind of sadness and betrayal she felt, and now Charlotte made her worried she’d gone too far.

Last Halloween there had been a party. Andrea had stumbled out of her room after a long nap and ran into her roommates standing by the front door, coats in hand. Lydia was dressed in *Harry Potter* colors while Claire looked like some surrealist painting. The apartment didn’t have any windows so Andrea couldn’t shake the feeling like she was still asleep. In her memory, Claire and Lydia moved like they’re behind a screen, aware they’re being watched but their voices muted. They exchanged guilty looks and covered their costumes with their coats.

“Oh. Hey Andrea.” Lydia searched her purse for something. A dollar slipped out and floated to the carpet but she didn’t notice. Andrea stiffened. Interactions like this had become more frequent as their attempts to keep her uniformed grew clumsier.

“Are you guys going out?”

“Her department has an annual party. I’m her date,” Lydia explained.

“Cool.”

“You can come too.” Claire squeaked. The offer dragged so that Andrea felt the effort weighing on her voice. Her smile was glossy and her curly hair sprung out underneath a bowler hat. Andrea’s neck hurt as she forced herself to smile while she declined.

She wanted to explain this memory to Ellie and Charlotte, that she had strung up so many moments like that together. They were these strange, embarrassing events that left her stranded in their living room and watching the door long after Claire and Lydia closed it. She threaded these moments on a long string and had begun losing count of how many there were. They blurred but she tried to hold each moment and feel its smooth, cold surface, manipulating the event until she wasn’t sure it even existed anymore. She wondered what was real and what were the creations she’d made in her own head.

Maggie reentered, her slippers swishing over the floor. "That smells good, sweetheart," she said to Charlotte. "Make sure you put in enough butter. You don't use enough."

"By the way," Charlotte's voice leapt, "your snake almost got out again today."

Andrea sorted through bills and letters from St. Wensc asking for donations. She remembered Ellie's plea and wanted to avoid an argument. Utensils rattled as Maggie opened a drawer and brought over a handful of forks and knives to Andrea.

"Be nice, Charlotte," Maggie smoothed Andrea's hair. She smelled like coffee and lavender. "Did Charlotte tell you guys I'm having my friends over Saturday?"

Andrea nodded.

"So I need some help moving those bookcases. So far they all said they're coming so we need the space."

Andrea cleared the table and arranged the silverware at each chair. Charlotte explained the explained the expectations for the awards night at school the next week, an annual event that congratulated honors students and announced the seniors attending military academies.

"What award do you think you'll get?" Ellie asked, "You liked science this year, yeah?"

"Definitely not. Sister Franklin hates me."

"No one hates you guys!" Maggie exclaimed, "Stop saying that."

“Whatever. I don’t think I’ll get an award this year.”

“You never know.”

Andrea rubbed the water spots on a fork, feeling relieved and sick at the same time.

Charlotte

The first half of dinner was quiet but Maggie clearly enjoyed having all her daughters in the same space. Charlotte saw her look around the dark table and ducked as her mom's gaze paused on her. Maggie placed a hand on Charlotte's shoulder and smoothed her thumb over a patch of skin she called "sensitive" but Charlotte knew was rash.

"How's school?" she asked gently.

Charlotte shrugged, "Fine. There's a rumor this the chemistry teacher's last year, but no one's sure if he quit or got fired."

"What happened?"

"Probably lives with his girlfriend. Or worse, his boyfriend." Charlotte joked but was met with sighs. Andrea half-heartedly stabbed a carrot. "People come and go all the time. I bet he just found a better job."

"It's too bad they don't get paid more. I always think you guys got such a good education."

"It's all up to the diocese," Ellie muttered before the table lapsed into silence again. It was unusual for their family to be so quiet but these kinds of conversations did

that. It was why Charlotte held back from talking about Full Moon at home, knowing it'd set Ellie off and make Andrea uncomfortable.

"Has anyone spoken to their dad recently?" Maggie asked. They looked at each other until Ellie said that the last she heard he might be coming for the awards ceremony. Charlotte vaguely remembered a text a few weeks ago and was about to suggest holding a ticket for him when Andrea kicked her foot under the table.

"Hey, who was that boy who dropped your off the other day?"

Charlotte's cheeks warmed.

"He looked tall. I saw him leaning over in his car so his head wouldn't hit the roof. How old is he? He looks old."

Maggie put her fork down. Everyone waited for an answer.

"No one. His name's Theo and goes to Northeast. I needed a ride."

"Was he at that protest?" Ellie's words trailed and she rolled her fingers against the table. Charlotte smirked as Ellie's lips flattened and knew her sister was debating how much she wanted to admit her own involvement. She sucked at secrets.

Maggie squinted, "What protest?"

Charlotte pushed back from the table but the chair legs stuck in the carpet.

"Oh come on, I was just teasing."

"Can someone answer me?" Maggie demanded.

“It was just a small thing by the capitol, mom. It’s no big deal.”

Charlotte opened her mouth and felt her voice crack in her throat. She wanted to bring up the stolen vibrator, feeling anger unfold as she tried to get her sister to look at her. She pushed away from the table again and felt her mom’s hand helping pull the chair back.

“You didn’t eat much.” Her mom said. s

“I’m fine. I ate a late lunch.”

Charlotte stood and hesitated as her mom held her arms out for a hug. She gave in and fell into her mom’s embrace. She still wore her auburn hair long and the soft waves pressed against Charlotte’s cheek, the remnants of her shampoo buried underneath. Her anger at Andrea flickered as she lingered, grateful for someone who was mom-aged, something she had that her sisters didn’t.

“I miss you,” Maggie said as her daughter pulled away, “you’re so busy.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She touched Charlotte’s arm again. “Have you been using that stuff we got?”

Most of the time the rash was covered by her sleeve, so Charlotte usually forgot about it, but the increased attention made her arm tingle. “Yeah, but I don’t think it works. I think I need those steroids the doctor suggested.”

Maggie rubbed her temple before pulling her hair away from her face. “We’ll see,” she whispered, and Charlotte could tell it hurt her to say that.

The steering wheel was sticky with humidity so Charlotte drove with her fingertips. Her car, a 2000 Ford, was old but she told herself that made it wiser and she often felt like she had more trust in her car than she did with most people. Joy's house was only a few miles but she stalled in Friday evening traffic for thirty minutes before sending a text at a red light to say she'd be late. Charlotte rested her chin on the wheel and watched cars brake lights flash off and on. Lincoln was built like a small town with narrow, one-way streets and too few stoplights. Theo told people it was like a doll house: frozen in time.

Charlotte turned onto Peach, smiling when the car swooped along a brief dip in the road that made her stomach drop. Large oaks rose up around her and a few street lights had begun flickering on. She passed manicured lawns and signs reading *keep kids alive, drive 25*. Joy's neighbor sported a Governor Murray sign and Charlotte hoped they could see her flipping it off as she parked and walked to the house.

Joy's dad answered. He was tall, mustached, and had worked in the same physical therapy office since Joy was born. He had always looked old to Charlotte but still went camping with all the brothers and coached a baseball team through the Y. All of this embarrassed Joy and she complained about how overbearing her parents were and she wished they'd stop volunteering for everything. But Charlotte loved the way Joy's parents organized the Fourth of July bike parade and First Communion parties. And it all felt like museums when they displayed Joy and her brothers in posed photographs and later preserved their clothes. Charlotte knew Joy's mom invited her to their events

because she felt sorry for her, but Charlotte never felt like she was missing out on anything. It was funny to observe a different life and leave it when she wanted.

He gestured through the pretty house and out the French doors to the backyard, but Charlotte said she'd go around. Halfway around the house she took off her shoes and let her feet sink into their soft lawn. The grass picked up the cooled evening air and the softness tickled her ankles. The sun dipped below the trees and the last light pierced through the branches. A lightning bug sprouted in front of Charlotte and zipped away before she could reach out. The backyard was on a small hill, which gave the space a rolling quality that started at the patch of concrete along the house and spilled under the low chain-link fence.

Everyone sat on the scattered patio furniture and folding chairs. On the large plastic table Joy had arranged bags of chips and a liter of soda propped up in a bowl of ice. Charlotte wondered if she'd been reading her mom's *Good Housekeeping* scattered around the house. Joy was lighting the torches lined along the edges when Charlotte approached, her gaze flickering with the tiny flames before she smiled and waved. Shadows pulled over their friend's faces as they leaned in and out of the lights. Alone in a black Adirondack chair sat Theo, seemingly unconcerned with the gap between himself and the others. Charlotte sat beside him.

"About time!" Joy wasn't holding the lighter long enough and the final wick wouldn't catch. She gave up and collapsed into a chair next to a boy from their Spanish class. Charlotte watched the others pass around cups, giggling. Someone commented on

their countdown to graduation while others swapped horror stories about their semester. Joy prodded Charlotte's leg.

"You okay? You seem spacey."

"Why'd you invite Theo? I thought you didn't like him."

Joy shrugged. "I saw that I still have his numbers from when I'd go with you to Full Moon. I thought you might appreciate it."

Charlotte accepted a plastic cup from Joy and held the sip of pop in her mouth so the bubbles stung for a moment. She caught Theo's gaze, who raised his eyebrows and spoke. "No offense, but your school kind of sounds like it sucks." He didn't bother to whisper.

Joy rolled her eyes. "Only sometimes," she laughed over the nervous shuffling from across the circle. "I keep telling Charlotte she should run for student government next year. I think she'd be really good at it."

Charlotte couldn't hide the small glow in her chest. She pulled herself forward on her chair and waved off the other brief words of encouragement. Joy was right, she didn't want to sink so much energy into her high school since she'd heard Ellie's friends felt so defeated by the end. But she accepted her friends' kindness and tucked it away, hoping to come back to it later.

They started talking about the recent spring formal when Theo interrupted, "Do the nuns really kick you out of dances if you're caught grinding?"

A breeze ran through the circle. Charlotte snorted, "The nuns are actually really nice. It's the guidance counselor and the principal that get a little strict." She worried Theo was causing awkwardness in the group and stifled the embarrassment she felt. But as she looked around she saw the other boys mimicking the same outstretched position Theo held, the soles of their shoes glowing near the small fire.

"It's pretty frustrating a lot of the time. But my older sisters went there so it's a legacy thing I think," Charlotte took another sip from her cup, "Also my mom's Irish. It's pretty much required to go to Catholic school."

Joy giggled and went to talk to another girl. Theo talked about the new art studios being built downtown and started describing his own idea for the space, a catch-all makers space with white boards, paints, even industrial tools. Charlotte tried to ask how he was going to get all this stuff, especially the money, but he seemed unconcerned. After she mentioned money a few times she gave up and let his voice come and go in waves. She figured Theo would find the money somehow, and if not, the people who were willing to provide the materials and their time. He had a deep enough following that most of the time he could pull off these ideas. But Charlotte figured it'd have to run out at some point and she wondered why he never thought to discuss a plan B.

As Theo talked on Charlotte realized how much she needed context for Theo's company. She felt like she was managing him. He didn't really fit in everywhere. Even outside the party Charlotte knew that after each protest, each meeting at Full Moon,

she felt her interest in him waning. But she couldn't leave the way Joy had, not until she felt the weight of his influence shift to her. At Full Moon, people looked to Theo for guidance in a town they felt ignored them. But Charlotte felt like she could do more, be more influential or at least refreshing. But that was hard to say without sounding overconfident. So for now she waited.

"Charlotte!" Joy called. "Tell Brandon how much we liked that zombie movie the other week."

Charlotte pushed her legs out until her knees popped. "I'm kind of over the zombie thing, but this one was super fun."

"I'd see it if you wanted to see it again," Brandon said directly to Joy, who looked down and smiled.

"The blood looked real. I think Charlotte got a little grossed out."

Charlotte stuck her tongue out at her friend and felt Theo brush her arm as he leaned back and stretched his neck to look through the glass door. He yawned and from his pocket pulled out a small flask, holding it out to Charlotte first before asking if anyone else wanted some. The boys glanced at each other before forming a strange, formal line. Charlotte didn't hesitate to hold out her own cup.

Andrea

It was too early in the morning for a fight but Andrea crossed her arms and glared at her mother anyway. Maggie let her own arms drop to her sides and huffed.

“Mom. I can’t take Charlotte to school. Not today.”

“We talked about this last night. If you want the car you have to drive Charlotte.”

The coffee maker’s spitting died down. The dark roast scent filled the kitchen while Andrea watched her mom struggle with opening her travel mug. Andrea started to protest but Maggie cut her off.

“I wish we could afford a car for Charlotte, it’d make everything so much easier. But living here means you have to contribute to the family, which means your car. That’s the deal.”

Andrea closed her eyes while her mom brushed past her. She was exhausted after a sleepless night, thinking about Charlotte’s anger over the vibrator. She hadn’t been able to look at Charlotte for the rest of dinner and then Charlotte left suddenly, saying she was going to Joy’s. But Andrea felt like she’d been the one to drive her away.

She opened her eyes and looked around the kitchen, drawn by the flashes of color breaking up the whiteness. Postcards and old art stuck to the fridge, and ceramic bowls her mom had picked up from thrift stores dotted the counter. Maggie pattered around behind her and Andrea strained, waiting for her mom to speak first. Above them, a door slammed, signaling Charlotte was awake.

“Fine. I’ll take her.”

“Thank you.” Maggie replied but it didn’t sound thankful to Andrea.

Andrea dragged herself upstairs and stood outside the bathroom door for a second, her fist poised to knock. She took a deep breath and then began pounding on the door. “Hey! Get ready faster. I have to do something before I drop you off at school.”

Charlotte opened the door an inch, enough for Andrea to see her bangs sticking up wildly from behind a wide headband. “I’m working on it.”

“We have to go as soon as possible because Christopher’s friend says that he gets back from the gym at eight.”

“What?”

Andrea groaned, “I’m getting the vibrator back, okay? You guilted me last night.”

Charlotte smiled. Andrea could feel the steam from the shower sticking to the door, already beginning to curl the small hairs around Charlotte’s face. Her grey eyes flashed silver and she agreed to be quick.

Andrea wandered between rooms, sat on her bed and swung her legs as she watched the bathroom door. Feeling heavy and dried out after no sleep, Andrea had spent most the night tracking down Christopher's schedule by texting friends she hadn't spoken to in months until she finally got the number of a fraternity brother that lived down the hall. *He has my study notes* she texted over and over. No one asked what kind of study notes, but three boys pointed out the mistake of exchanging notes and not numbers.

Charlotte finished her shower and appeared wrapped in a towel. She hugged her arms over her chest and scowled. "Get out!"

Andrea raced passed her and waited by the front door, keys in hand. Eventually Charlotte came down in her plaid skirt and her eyes rimmed in dark liner.

"You owe me."

"I'll buy you coffee or something." Andrea hurried to the car and hoped Charlotte would pick up on her urgency a little more, but she felt her patience waning as Charlotte wrestled with her enormous backpack, trying to fit it in the space between the front and back passenger.

"Just put it on the seat!"

"I don't want it falling. Then I'd have to buckle it in and that's stupid when I can just put it here."

"Do you really need all that? It's as big as you are."

Charlotte shut the door and looked out the window without responding. It was pointless. Charlotte spent her energy and emotion on what she chose, not what others chose for her.

“I better not be late for school.”

“If you are, I’ll call you in. I sound like mom on the phone.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence as they sped toward campus. Neither one touched the radio even as they stalled in traffic and Andrea listened to her own slow breathing. It was the longest she’d stayed still in twelve hours and she felt jittery, her heart fluttered. She’d always been a nervous person but it was never something she got used to. She slammed on her brakes and the tightened seatbelt strained across her chest. The Jeep pulled forward and Andrea saw she’d had plenty of space to slow down like a normal person.

“It’s so different.” Charlotte said.

“What is?”

“This part of town. It’s only a few miles from mom’s but look at that house,” she pointed at a colonial-style house on the corner. It was baby blue and wrapped in a wide porch. A mailbox that looked like a barn stood in front while flowers flowed down the side.

“They make traffic difficult on purpose, you know,” Charlotte continued, “to make it harder for people like us to get to their nice neighborhoods.”

Andrea shifted. Her legs itched on the rough fabric. She didn't like when Charlotte talked like this since she always made herself angry. Andrea didn't know who "they" was either but didn't ask because she worried Charlotte would grow more annoyed. Apparently she was already supposed to know.

"Do they expect us to feel, like, motivated by things like this? Nice houses and weird mailboxes? Is that the dream?"

"I think the mailbox is cute."

Andrea saw her sister glance at her before looking back out the window, which made her guess that she'd someone become part of the "they." But she wasn't sure what she was supposed to say. Charlotte's voice sounded curled on the edges, like she had been trying to guide Andrea toward a certain conclusion and failed. Andrea picked the peeling vinyl on the wheel and pushed Charlotte's attitude to the back of her mind. She needed her help today and her sister's attitude couldn't distract her now. Andrea sped through a yellow light.

"In high school, did you ever feel like we were proving their points about divorce or something? Like if we messed up someone might say 'what do you expect?'"

"Jeez, Charlotte. Not really." Andrea turned on the radio and a boy band pumped through the speakers asking for love and loyalty and promises. She focused on the words but after a minute they began sounding creepy. Maybe she had felt that way a little at the time, but high school was four years ago and most of St. Wensc felt silly to her now. Charlotte seemed to think everything was connected somehow: St. Wensc to

her protests to whatever coffee shop or park she hung out at with Theo. But Andrea thought telling Charlotte she was being dramatic would fall on deaf ears.

Andrea thought Charlotte enjoyed the fight more than the resulting change. And that was impossible to negotiate with.

She switched the radio to a country station where a man sang about painted on jeans. She shivered and turned it off, grateful when she could see the frat house in the distance. Unlike the older buildings the fraternity house didn't have the standard pillars in front. But it was large with dark red brick and a heavy door guarded by a lion's head knocker. And despite the lack of pillars, it was the most fortress-like house on Greek row. Cars slowed as they drove by to look at the sculpted topiaries and low grey stone wall around it. Donors' names were sketched into the stone, which glittered in the sunlight.

Andrea parked on the side street too far over the line but she didn't care. They walked to the corner and watched the building's entrance as boys ambled out toward their classes. Each one had their hands shoved in their pockets and if it weren't for their hair colors, they'd all look identical to Andrea. The crosswalk sign changed twice before Andrea spoke.

"The plan is to get in and get out."

"Wow. Foolproof."

“If you speak to anyone just say that I’m there to pick up some notes I lent to Chris. Actually, don’t talk. I’ll do all the talking.” She felt like she was about to take a test she hadn’t studied for. She walked heel-toe across the street, feeling stiff but determined, not noticing a car trying to turn left until it honked. She sped up and they reached the front door too fast and she found herself staring down the lion’s wide mouth.

“Oh my god,” Charlotte whispered and knocked before Andrea could stop her. A bleary-eyed boy who looked too young for high school, let alone college, answered.

“Hi!” Andrea cleared her throat. “We’re here for Chris. Christopher. He has some of my notes that I need back. He promised he’d-“

The boy glanced at Charlotte’s plaid skirt seemed to take it as confirmation they could be trusted because he opened the door wider and let them in.

“You go to St. Wensc?” he asked, cutting Andrea off.

Charlotte looked down, “Uh. Yeah.”

“My cousin goes there. Plays football. Have I seen you at the games before?”

“I don’t watch football. It’s-“

Andrea grabbed Charlotte’s arm and pulled her toward the dark wood stairs. She didn’t want to hear her sister’s manifesto on the evils of football right now, and they were wasting time. “That’s great but we really need those notes.”

She took the stairs two at a time. The carpet at the top was thin, like a hotel's, and led to a tall window at the end. Sunlight stretched down the hallway and slid off the glossy wood doors. There was so much wood that it almost felt like a treehouse. A cold, hotel-like treehouse. As she counted the numbers on the doors she felt her confidence in Christopher's gym routine falter. She recalled Claire's complaint's about his fitness obsession but Andrea considered all the reasons he might skip the gym that morning. He could be injured or sick. Maybe he lost all his motivation after their breakup.

They found number two-fifteen and memories of watching gross horror and action movies in that same room flooded back to her. They crammed in too many people and Andrea usually sat on the floor with her back against the futon, waiting for Chris to win over Claire. She pushed the door open and hoped surged through her as she scanned the desk and saw above a giant tub of protein powder, the lofted bed was empty.

All she had to do was find the vibrator and throw it out. Claire could blame its disappearance on the move, lost in the shuffle. They could see each other at parties or downtown and be civil, laugh at each other's jokes, and then grow apart naturally.

Charlotte pushed the door wider, which broadened the triangle of light over the floor. The roommate stirred in the other lofted bed. The sound sent Charlotte bolting to the cluttered dresser and began sifting through piles. Andrea closed the door and searched the desk.

“Do you see it?” Charlotte’s features moved in and out of the shadows. Someone had draped a red flannel blanket over the window and it cast a strange rusty glow over her cheeks. Andrea ignored her and pushed aside the pens, folders, and expired movie tickets. A beam of light pierced through the darkness, jumping over a five-subject notebook that made her skin go cold until she saw it led back to Charlotte’s phone.

“Turn that off.” She hissed.

“Do you want to find this thing or not?” but Charlotte clicked it off. The roommate moved again and the both stopped until the plastic mattress stopped rustling.

Andrea took small steps from one end to the other until her foot kicked something rough and hollow, but sounded like a gun shot. She braced herself and slowly knelt on the carpet. The short fibers dug into her knees as she angled the box toward the reddish light, her own loopy handwriting swerving over the label. The box was empty. It wasn’t surprising but Andrea’s throat tightened and she didn’t tell Charlotte to stop. Instead she scanned the contents under the desk, but the scarf was gone too. Chris had probably burned them.

Box still in hand she stood and saw a glass jar stuffed with pens, a small keychain dangling from one. It looked like a license plate and when Andrea pressed the button, the name *Chris* lit up. The plastic rested in her palm and Andrea turned it over and over before she hooked her finger through the keyring and pocketed it.

A knock beat against the door. "Hey man! Get up!" a voice yelled before two guys fell in and turn on the light. Something crash from Charlotte's direction and the four blinked at each other, stunned, until the roommate swore and sat up.

"Why are there so many *people* here?"

"Hey, so sorry." Andrea still held the box. Its cardboard flaps rubbed together and made her cringe but she didn't put it down. "I needed some notes. Chris had them. They should be here and I was told it'd be fine and-"

Everyone looked at the box until Charlotte grabbed an orange folder and waved it like a flag. The two at the door stared at them. One wore a t-shirt from their fundraiser a few years before, a dancing waffle printed on the front and Andrea's mind blanked. It was all so ridiculous and even though she was technically trespassing, she felt less and less motivated to explain herself to them.

Charlotte stepped over the clothes scattered on the ground and shoved her way out. "I need to get to school. Can't be late." Andrea followed but the one with the polo shirt stopped her.

"You're one of Claire's friends, right? Her roommate."

"Ex-room...yeah, I am."

"We miss you guys. What've you been doing?"

"Uh. Not much. Still biology. I don't graduate until next year though."

“I’m interning at Thompson-Clarke this semester. Should be cool.” The boy had a rosy flush that wouldn’t leave his cheeks, making him look sunburned. “They’ll probably offer me a spot after graduation. Sixty-thousand right out the gate.” He chuckled and tucked his polo shirt deeper into his pants. His name was stitched on the front, underneath the fraternity’s crest and Andrea had to hold back her laughter. The fabric folded over the letters and even though Andrea could see it began with an A, she couldn’t remember the rest.

She muttered something close to a goodbye and agreed, sure, they should hang out some time.

Charlotte was waiting for her halfway down the stairs, her hand twisted around the glossy banister and surveying the bare common room.

“They need a woman’s touch here.” Charlotte told Andrea as she fast-walked around a low brown leather couch and past a massive painting of Pope John Paul II.

“Wow. Gender stereotypes from Charlotte O’Donnell?” But she laughed and struggled with the heavy front door. She had grabbed the handle still holding the box, both of which slid out of her grasp. Charlotte lunged forward, her elbow jabbing Andrea’s side, and pulled the door back with two hands.

“Was it this heavy before?”

They ran over the front steps and across the street, panting when they fell into the car. Andrea threw the box in the backseat but didn’t start the car right away. She

felt awake, excited, frustrated the vibrator was gone but also sort of relieved. It was really out of her hands now.

Andrea dropped her forehead on the wheel, pressing too hard so the horn beeped and sent them both into shocked laughter.

“I keep...I...” Andrea couldn’t breathe. Her heart beat fast behind her ribs, wanting free. She looked beside her and while Charlotte wasn’t laughing, she smiled wide so Andrea could see the way one of her sharper teeth crossed over the other. Charlotte moved her seatbelt behind her.

“What?”

“I keep thinking of puns. Like....” Andrea made a vague flourish with her hands, uncertain if she wanted Charlotte understanding her thoughts. More importantly, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to know that that Charlotte understood them. Her sister’s own rough laugh started building. It rolled from her throat.

“Like how that was a sticky situation?” Charlotte asked.

“I think we handled it pretty well though.”

Charlotte’s laughter doubled over in a coughing fit. A cramp pierced Andrea’s side and she noticed Charlotte was late for school.

Ellie

Maggie kept calling Saturday the day of the 'party' but Ellie wished she call it a book club or gathering or even a 'ladies night,' a phrase she hated for its connotations that didn't match up with Maggie and her friends. But Ellie had no idea how a 'party' could fit in their apartment and she kept reminding herself it wasn't that big of a deal. Maggie saw these women twice a month for this specific book discussion, and usually one or two other times as well.

She saw her friends more than Ellie saw her own, a thought saddening until Ellie considered how much work her friends were. Even Noah, who she considered the lowest maintenance, had been irritating her with his frequent suggestions they go to the LSAT test prep together. She'd run out of ways to say no and now had to change the subject when he brought it up.

Maggie clapped her hands and looked around the apartment, scanning the remaining chores before her friends arrived. "Will you help me with the bookcases? I took the heavy stuff off the shelves," she gestured toward a pile of books near the television. She wore grey sweats shredded by her heels and t-shirt from Andrea's production of *Fiddler on the Roof* at St. Wenc. Ellie followed her to the short, long case they used to divide the living room from the kitchen, and lifted it by the top shelf. The

taller one they placed beside it would have to be pushed. Maggie used to think they could slide it over the carpet, but one broken vase later they knew they couldn't risk it.

Once moved they arranged the couch and kitchen chairs at the center of the large, single room in a circle. "I always forget the way this place looked when we moved in," she placed her hands on her hips, "I remember walking in and thinking we can never fill this space, and now look!"

"It's definitely filled."

"I know..." she laughed and as if to prove Ellie's point, straightened a pile of magazines before lining them up with the edge of the coffee table.

"I can throw those out if you want."

"Don't worry about it. Are you doing anything fun this weekend?"

Ellie shook her head.

"How was work? You had the morning shift, right?"

She hadn't told her mom she'd been fired yet, but she'd practiced it in the car on the way home. She thought her last day would've been filled with regret and panic, but she caught herself from rejoicing in her freedom as she burst through her front door. For now, Maggie looked distracted, her attention shifting from the table to the kitchen and Ellie knew she was thinking about the amount of food they had and if was enough.

"It was fine. The mornings are calmer." Guilt seeped through Ellie but she promised herself she'd tell her mom when there was more time, whether to explain herself or let her mom react. "What book are you reading?"

"*The DaVinci Code*. It wasn't my pick."

"You sinners."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "It's not even a good book. The movie will probably be worse. Lisa's insisting we see it next week. But you'd think if they didn't want people reading it, they wouldn't make such a fuss about it."

They had a few hours before guests arrived and Ellie fell into the threadbare armchair, curling her legs underneath her. The television in front was blank and she could see her bloated reflection in the curved screen. She closed her eyes but told herself she couldn't nap. Sweat formed where her face rested in her palm.

"Are you okay, sweetheart? Your face looks pink."

Ellie opened her eyes and saw her mom sitting on the closer side of the couch. The plastic-covered copy of *The DaVinci Code* crinkled between her fingers.

"It's a little warm in here. But it's okay. I'm fine just sitting here for a while."

Ellie was twelve when her parents divorced and her mom and sisters moved to a tiny, rusted apartment. She still drove by the complex whenever she went to or from her mom's. It's tan and with brown details were easy to spot even though there were

only a few, close buildings clustered behind a Shell station. It was a busy part of town, loud and exposed by the low surrounding buildings. The first time her carpool dropped her off, the girl pressed her nose against her window and said “I’ve never been *here* before.”

Ellie could hear everything that happened in the neighbors’ apartments. Now, she laughed about it when she told her friends it was the sex education they never got at St. Wenceslaus. But at the time the sounds heard through the walls frightened her. At school her friends reported gruesome stories about local homicides and robberies on her side of town and as a result, Ellie became obsessed with police reports and public records. She thought reading turned them into stories instead of events. She didn’t recognize the names or the mugshots published on the *Journal Star’s* website, and it kept her feeling distant. The lack of familiarity validated the fiction aspect and it was a strategy she used later when reading case files in her classes and internships.

She hated being alone, though. She never heard gunshots or broken glass, but the silence made her imagine them she wandered from room to room, jumping at nothing.

There was one day where school was canceled because of an impending snow storm, the sky stiff and grey, ready to break open. A pounding at their door split the silence and Ellie heard her dad yelling on the other side. She dragged a stepstool to the peephole and saw his red, angry face bloated by the glass’s curve. Andrea was at a

friend's but Charlotte napped in the other room. Ellie buckled her knees and felt the stool wobble, pressing her body against the door.

Ellie. his voice was even and concentrated on each letter. He screamed that he knew she was there while she gently got down and moved the stool to the side. She rested her hand on the knob, unmoving. Go to the far end of the apartment, Maggie had told her, and wait. He said her name again, matching the syllables with his fist. *Elinor* he said again and she gripped harder. The door rattled so Ellie's head bumped against it, even though she wouldn't know why she had leaned so close.

When she turned she saw Charlotte standing in the hallway. She said nothing and stared at Ellie with her stoic glare. Ellie held her gaze like two ends of a high wire act.

Andrea

On late Saturday afternoon Andrea sat with Ellie at the top of the stairs and listened to their mother answer the door.

“Saturday finals suck.” Ellie said as a woman tripped over the entry, glass bottles clinking in her canvas bag.

“Well that’s my life right now.” Andrea leaned her chin on her knees. “I’ll be back later. Do you think mom’s friends will still be here?” She should’ve been studying but she liked the house’s energy and admired the way their mom could fit everyone inside. “How was your last day at the call center?”

Ellie pushed her heel into the carpet. “Fine. I feel guilty about being relieved. Do you think it’s okay that I’m relieved?”

“I guess. It kind of sounds like they were looking for a way to fire you. Not having the right *tone*? That’s stupid.”

“Why would they hire me if they just wanted to fire me? That’s a personal attack.”

Andrea grew bored at her sister’s attempts at gathering sympathy, knowing she’d have to wade through Ellie’s emotions. Ellie thought too hard about things and it wouldn’t hurt to be a little shallow sometimes. She saw her sister rest her chin in her

hand, her fingers layered over her mouth. Dark purple circles sunk under her eyes but they were all tired and sympathy had to be given in shifts.

“Lisa brought a lot of wine.”

“They never drink that much. They will, however, eat all the pizza later. I’ll save you some.”

They were quiet while the women’s voices came up from the kitchen. Someone elaborated on her feelings over her husband’s trip to Rhode Island, explaining she would have loved to tag along but she didn’t like Rhode Island that much and besides, their book club was so important. Andrea liked her mom’s friends well enough, but sometimes she didn’t understand why Maggie hung out with them. They were a little older but had a weird preciousness about them, a fragility common in church wives. Their mom was neither precious nor a church wife so Andrea wasn’t sure they had a lot to talk about.

They spoke in waves. Their voices collided and cascaded in throaty laughter, which was triggered by strange events like a broken car or a husband who wouldn’t pick up his phones. Things that Andrea didn’t find funny and felt disturbed by the fullness of their laughter.

“I grew up with four dogs,” Maggie spoke up, “My dad hated them and we didn’t adopt them so much as let them come and go as they pleased. He threatened me to stop feeding them, but was I supposed to let them starve?”

The more Maggie talked, the louder she became. Her voice sounded like her mom knew her role and worked to perfect it. Surrounded by her friends, Maggie wasn't blurry or tense. She exuded an ease that came with feeling confident in her position. Andrea was proud of her mom but times like these she wasn't entirely sure who her mom was. She told herself it was okay, that everyone was different around their friends, but wasn't sure she liked missing certain parts about her mom.

"Did you know that about the dogs?" Andrea whispered.

"Maybe. I'm sure she's mentioned them before."

Maggie suggested they move to the living room and someone asked if the pizza had been ordered yet. Ellie and Andrea exchanged looks before Ellie pulled herself up by the railing and adjusted her t-shirt.

"Which one is it?"

"The one with the shortest hair. Marge or something."

"That can't be her name."

"It isn't. I don't think that's even close. Maybe once I see her it'll click." Andrea stood and looked up at Ellie on the step above her.

"Don't you have a final?"

"I have like an hour. It'll be fine." She let Ellie go past her and followed her to the living room. The stairs curved at the bottom so Andrea grasped the rail and swung her leg around the corner, missing the last step and skipping after Ellie. Including Maggie,

there were five other women squeezed into the living room. The arm chair that usually sat in the corner now joined the lopsided circle anchored by the couch. The low coffee table was placed in the middle and covered in pita chip bags and dips in a rainbow of colors. Two women sat on the couch, including the one Ellie needed, but Andrea still couldn't remember her name. The woman smiled too big and Andrea realized she'd been staring.

"Hi Everyone!" Ellie's voice swirled around the room and built on itself. When she spoke, the others listened and leaned forward. Andrea felt uncomfortable, but in the way cold air felt: sharp, biting, but awake. Ellie wasn't saying anything important, just small talk as she worked her way into asking for a job. But it flowed so easily from her mouth that Andrea wondered how much she worked at pushing down her anxiety.

Not-Marge looked up at Ellie thoughtfully.

"I like your earrings," Andrea whispered, diverting the woman's attention. They were smooth plastic circles in a black and white mod-style. They must have been heavy though because her ears stretched toward her shoulders.

The woman reached out and touched Andrea's arm with her fingertips, "Oh thank you. They were a gift." She withdrew her hand and sat up straighter, "I'm sure you don't remember me. My twins went to school with Ellie."

"Oh, right! Yeah, um...Mrs..."

"Svoboda. You girls can call me Theresa."

Andrea noticed the room was quiet and when she looked back at the circle she saw her mom taking a drink from her wine glass and Ellie raised her eyebrows. Lisa stage-whispered a question about law school.

“I don’t think that’s the direction my life is going in.”

Lisa nodded. “I’m glad you’re closer to your calling.”

“Sure.”

Andrea caught her mom’s gaze while the others validated Lisa’s comment. The room felt stuffy, padded with mismatched throw pillows and heavy seriousness. Ellie opened her palms and ducked her head, looking bashful.

“Theresa.” Andrea said and confusion flashed over Ellie’s face before it twisted into annoyance. Andrea realized asking was part of Ellie’s plan and blushed.

“Theresa...I heard you’re looking for a nanny?”

“Oh my gosh, yes! Are you available?” She exclaimed, “I swear I’m going crazy. I thought this would be so easy after the twins but apparently I’m not prepared at all. All these new twenty-something mothers seem to think they know more than me. It’s overwhelming.”

Ellie giggled, “I’d love to help. I have the time right now.”

“I’d be so grateful. You’re a real blessing.”

Maggie set her glass on the coffee table and picked up her copy of *The DaVinci Code*, slapping the paperback against her knee. “Are you sure you’re going to have time, Ellie? With the call center?” She turned to Theresa, “I’m sorry, I just don’t want Ellie to set anyone’s expectations too high.”

Ellie rotated her foot until the ankle popped. Her arm brushed against Andrea’s and without thinking Andrea pushed back against her sister. The move caught her off guard and Ellie’s speech faltered, her voice dipped. Goosebumps prickled Andrea’s skin.

“I-I don’t work there anymore.”

Andrea wished Ellie had just lied as an awkward pause fell. She saw at least two trying to get a look at Maggie but most kept their heads down, paging through their books or rifling through the chips. She stood beside Ellie and swore she could feel the heat of her sister’s anger, her smooth plan now disrupted. Andrea shoved her hands in her pockets and pulled her elbows close, reducing the amount of space she took up.

She wanted Ellie to push her chin up and explain why she got fired or even shrug and make them feel silly they assumed she would work at a place like that for too long. But instead she insisted it wasn’t a big deal and stepped back. She sounded on the edge of a plea, searching for an escape.

“I have to get ready for my final,” Andrea said, “but even though Ellie got fired it wasn’t her fault. She was-“

“You got *fired*?” Maggie gripped her chair.

“Forget about them, those places are the worst,” she smoothed the air, “I think this was supposed to happen. Everything happens for a reason.”

The others nodded. Lisa brought out her purse from under her chair, searched it, and handed Maggie a worn bill.

“Maggie, before I forget, for the pizza.”

“What? It’s fine. Really.”

“I know I’ll forget and then-“

The conversation shifted to the payments and the others started offering Maggie their share. Maggie’s face flushed she stood up, wiping her hands on her denim skirt before rushing toward the kitchen. She kept insisting it was fine.

Upstairs, Andrea lifted Carl from his cage and smoothed his back. He wrapped himself around her wrist and she could feel their pulses against one another. Her wrist warmed.

“I thought you hated kids.”

“I don’t hate kids. I’m not a fan but I don’t hate them. I need to get used to them.”

“So this will be, like, exposure therapy?”

Ellie frowned and glanced at Carl. "I'm the one who should be mad, you told mom I got fired."

"You should've told her when it happened!" Andrea slapped the edge of her dresser, frustrated like she was begging Ellie to look at something right in front of her. She'd done Ellie a favor, stopping her from getting trapped in some lie. She felt Carl's muscles twitch and she hugged him closer, changing the subject.

"Did you see mom refill her wine glass? Maybe one of us should keep an eye on her."

"That's on you. I'm going to Noah's."

Andrea dragged her backpack over to Charlotte's bed and carefully crawled over the mattress before arranging her textbook on her lap. Ellie shoved her feet into a beat up pair of tennis shoes and told Andrea she'd be back later.

"So you're not saving me any pizza?"

Ellie didn't respond and pulled the door closed behind her.

Andrea reasoned she still had a few minutes before she should leave, figuring if she didn't know everything by now then she never would. She stared at Carl and felt comforted by his familiar shape as she released him from her hand and he slid over the open textbook page. He was always heavier than she expected and his flexibility tricked her into thinking him weightless.

Her phone lit up beside her, flashing a picture of Lydia on the beach holding a Mike's Hard Lemonade. Her stomach twisted but she didn't answer it. Lydia's wide smile stayed on the screen for a few seconds before going dark. It'd been ringing all day, filled with threats and lectures from Lydia defending Claire's honor. Andrea flipped her phone face-down. She hated Lydia's hovering, mother-like presence. It was fake, an excuse to pry into everyone's behavior

Andrea hadn't anticipated the vibrator saga continuing and assumed it would have ended after Christopher discovered it. But in the days since hers and Charlotte's reconnaissance mission, Christopher had taken it around town and posed it on local landmarks, sending the pictures to Claire. What disturbed Andrea the most was finding out about that from Charlotte, who told her the pictures had been circulating for a while and showed her one forwarded from a friend. The picture wasn't that bad, really, and had a nice color balance and strange attention to detail, depicting the toy at a community garden. Andrea wanted to regret it but...she felt sort of proud of herself.

Carl lifted his head. "I'm guilty," Andrea whispered, "But don't look at me like that." Still, she felt like she was getting closer to a world that didn't want her and she wasn't sure how to adjust. It saw her as competition or unintelligent or burdensome. She ran her finger over Carl's reddish skin, who closed his eyes and stilled, considering taking him with her. He could settle in the bottom of her bag and off her comfort if she needed it.

Downstairs, the door opened and slammed. Maggie's friends called their greetings while footsteps thundered up to their room. Charlotte pushed open the door and froze.

"Get off," she said through gritted teeth.

"Don't worry. I was just--"

"I've told you not to do that!"

Andrea shielded Carl until she could reach his cage by scooting off the bed and cradling him close. His smooth, glassy eyes appeared unconcerned as she lowered her hands and slid over the soft chips along the bottom.

"Calm down. I'm leaving soon anyway."

"Why don't you *listen*? Are you an idiot?" Charlotte snapped and Andrea jumped at her sister's harshness. Charlotte shoved past Andrea and searched for something on the case's shelves. Carl's cage rattled but when Andrea got closer, her sister's shoulder blocked the way.

"What are you looking for? Maybe I can help."

"How about you change my sheets?" She paged through a spiral notebook before tossing it on the ground. She began pulling on a yellow notebook lodged behind Carl's cage and Andrea's arms tensed, wanting only to place her hands on the cage to keep it in place but Charlotte turned, her eyes wide as she yanked the notebook.

"What is it with everyone and my bed anyway? You have your--"

It tipped and thudded on the ground, spilling its contents over the carpet. Carl shot out, wild with fear, through the mess and putrid water staining the carpet. The potent animal smell flooded the air while Andrea dropped her bag, fell on the floor, and searched for Carl while scraping the debris from the carpet. His eyes flashed from under Ellie's bed.

"What the *fuck*, Charlotte?" Dirt crammed up her nails. "Why don't you pay attention?"

Andrea's throat ached and she wouldn't take her eyes off Carl, worried he'd disappear if she looked away. She scooped what she could back in the bag but the carpet still looked dirty. She felt a coldness behind her and she heard Charlotte run back downstairs. Andrea sat on her heels, her hands caked in grime.

Shadows grew out of the campus by the time Andrea finished her final, but heat still radiated from her car and she used her shirt for protection, wrapping it around her hand before opening the door. The long days and extended sun dragged everyone down and even the heavy traffic behind her looked like it was melting. At least in the winter there was a sense of finality when the sun set, but she saw her summer stretched out and unending in front of her.

The final had been a painful, murky blur of letters and numbers. Andrea read them over and over before ignoring her pounding heart and marking an answer she

didn't know was right or wrong. Carl was in his cage, fine for now, but Andrea felted like she'd abandoned him.

A lot of her friends were going somewhere for the summer: abroad, home, family vacations, leaving Andrea stuck in Lincoln. She should get a job, but so few places hired for three months and Andrea figured by the time she interviewed and trained, it'd be time to quit. She tapped her steering wheel and waited for an opening in traffic. She should as her mom for a job at Markman's, but last summer she worked there mom micromanaged so much that Andrea ended up quitting.

It was weird seeing her mom in that context anyway where she was so bossy, demanding, and organized. They fought over where the red throw pillows should go and Andrea kept screaming "Who cares?" even after they'd gone home. She was glad her mom was proud of her job, but they'd begged Maggie for similar behavior at home: a little more organized, but she never was. So how was it easy for her to split herself like that?

Impatient, Andrea pressed on her gas and pulled into traffic, cutting someone off. She ignored the angry honk but was kept stagnant in the road. It wasn't weird for downtown to be so crowded on a Saturday, but Andrea couldn't see beyond the lines of cars in front of her and she wondered what could be going on. She turned up the radio's volume and hoped her mom hadn't seen the mess in her room.

The car inched forward, speeding up in spots before slamming on her brakes. A few blocks from campus a police officer directed traffic a four-way stop and her

annoyance flared. Some stupid driver probably sped through the stop and crashed. She waited her turn.

Cafes and salons lined the tight street, gaps filled in with thick oak trees and lush flower bushes. People drank coffee outside or kids ran in and out of the houses around the corner, but this time the sidewalks were empty and businesses' windows were dark. Outdoor seating had been locked up. An ambulance with its back doors open was parked in front of the Spanish-language bookstore and Andrea tried to see the damage as she drove by. But all she could see through the emergency vehicles was a mangled bike rack lying on its side. When she reached the intersection she turned left instead of going forward, parking in front of an apartment building. She wasn't the only one interested and she noticed two women leaning over their separate balconies. One kept her hand on her son's head, steadying him as he pushed his face through the wood slats.

Andrea got out and walked as close as she was able, crossing the street so she could hide in the parking lot behind a Mexican restaurant and see through the alleyway. Her breathing felt frantic as she stepped over stray bricks and uneven ground. There were so many police officers, the red and blue lights flashing between the trees. The other cars' headlights streaked over the pavement as men in dark suits maneuvered through the spaces and toward the bookstore. She covered her mouth from a nearby dumpster's stench and her mouth felt cloudy behind her palm. No one saw her step onto the curb.

Glass glistened against the sidewalk, reflecting the surrounding light. The space where the store used to be was hollow, the edges barely holding on. The windows were gone and the doorway was charred. Police pushed debris against the curb to make way for incoming vehicles and it made it difficult to tell how far the damage extended. Nothing had really been cleaned up, not yet. She stopped when yellow caution tape blocked her path.

Andrea realized how dark it was, the sun vanished all at once. A breeze passed and she wondered if what she tasted was ash.

She picked her way through broken glass and melted metal. Each unique shard sparkling like a fallen star.

Charlotte

The smell still hovered in the room. Charlotte stood in the doorway, a hand over her mouth and nose, and assessed the fallout. The glass box itself was okay, the sound of it falling had been worse than the damage, but Andrea had barely tossed everything back in before running out, claiming she'd be late for her final. And Carl was upset. Every time Charlotte got close his body arched up the sides and his head jerked violently.

Charlotte sprayed all-purpose cleaner until the rug was soaked, but felt stupid after a few seconds of scrubbing. She ripped a bunch of paper towels off a roll and pushed her weight over her hands. What made her really angry was that Andrea moped and complained and cried over Claire and Lydia, but then proved to be the kind of roommate Charlotte felt she'd ditch too. She imagined Claire and Lydia must have been on edge, expecting to find the snake in the dishwasher or for Andrea to steal their stuff.

Andrea had this expectation that there would always be someone around to take care of things for her. When they went to the frat house Charlotte had enjoyed it up until those other boys walked in. Her sister had froze, the cardboard box obvious because she practically waved it around like a flag. It had been Charlotte's job to distract and get out of the room without questions.

Maybe Andrea had thought of them as a team, but Charlotte wished Andrea understood that she always placed the heaviest responsibilities on others. Now it was her job to clean up after a snake no one liked. But that was Andrea- she expected them to deal.

The paper towel tore and left flakes embedded in the carpet. Charlotte grabbed a red t-shirt discarded under her bed and kept going, convinced she made progress. The women downstairs were engaged in the book's religious imagery and when Charlotte flew down, searching for cleaning supplies, Maggie seemed ready for a distraction.

"You okay? I heard a crash."

"It's fine. Just spilled some water."

"It sounded way too--"

Charlotte snapped and told her mom don't worry about it, ignoring the brief awkward pause behind her. While she rifled through cabinets, Andrea left without saying anything to their mom.

She convinced herself the carpet looked better and approached Carl as he wrapped around himself, curled up in the darkest corner. She hadn't seen him like this before and the longer she watched him, the more he seemed energized by his own fear. He was fast, but smooth and controlled too, like he had an urgent destination.

In the two years Andrea had owned Carl Charlotte had never held him. His glassy eyes twitched when she lifted him from the cage and was surprised by how heavy he

was. Her skin warmed under his body and her muscles strained as she walked out of their room. Her grip tightened as she imagined his long, lanky body zipping through her fingers. She wasn't prepared for how strong he was, how much of her own strength was required carrying downstairs.

She slipped past her mom who toyed with the DVD player, and into the garage. Her legs shook but it was cooler there and the air calmed her. Two broken bikes leaned against the wall and boxes from Ellie's move were stacked in the center. Rejected furniture took up most of the garage, like an old table positioned upside down so three of its four chairs tucked between the legs. She stepped on the concrete floor and maneuvered around the other dated and damaged pieces. Maggie complained at least once a week about the mess and told them she'd call Goodwill soon.

"How'd we even get all this crap?" Charlotte asked once.

"People, who are very nice and I appreciated at the time, gave me most of it after the divorce."

"That's nice of them."

"Yeah," Maggie twisted a worn-out silver ring around her index finger, "But we can't use most of it. There's a reason my friends stopped using it in the first place. Do you want that end table?"

Now, Charlotte stepped around that end table and looked at the baskets that held the recycling. She lowered Carl in the clutter and watched him wind through and

disappear among the tin and glass. He had slowed during their brief journey, comforted by hands interchangeable from Andrea's. As he flashed and vanished against the wall it occurred to her he might die and panic shot through her chest. She lifted her cold feet and heard the rippling sound of a can rolling over the ground.

He won't die, she reassured herself. This was only to freak Andrea out a moment and then Charlotte could throw open the garage door and prove how much Andrea was asking of them. The ripple effects of showing up, snake in hand, without considering what could happen.

She spotted Carl's body swerve through another basket of aluminum cans, picking up speed and running along the garage's edges. Cold sweat swept over her face and Charlotte's vision blurred. This was a mistake, she thought, and lunged through the recycling, falling over herself as she chased after her sister's pet. There wasn't a lot of space and Charlotte darted from one uncovered spot to the next, avoiding the fallen cans, newspaper piles, glass. She placed her hand on the upturned table leg to help lift herself over a box filled with old clothes when the leg wobbled. It must have been missing screws because pain ripped through her shoulder as the leg jutted to the side and Charlotte lost her balance. She caught herself on the concrete floor, pulling a paper bag down and sending cans and glass ringing through the room. Her eyes stung and her hands felt raw after slapping the flat ground. She waited until the sound lessened and jumped from the wall to the door to the corners, searching for Carl. But she didn't see him.

Charlotte pushed herself on her knees and hoped Carl would zip across the floor. Did snakes shake? Would he lash out? She remembered the way his head arched over the glass after Andrea dropped him in and ran to her final, his body twisted in fear.

She carefully crawled across the garage, scanning the floor. She felt small. Something heavy pushed on her back as she looked, unable to stand and not wanting to see the mess she made.

Andrea came home later than she said she would. Maggie's friends had left and their mom was in bed. Charlotte sat alone on the couch with her feet propped on the coffee table and pretending to read. When Andrea arrived, she stayed by the front door for a while. Charlotte couldn't see what her sister was doing but the seconds dragged as she slowly took off her shoes and walked through ragged breaths.

She jumped when she passed Charlotte on the couch.

"How long have you been there?" But she shut herself in the small bathroom before Charlotte could answer. Charlotte smoothed her hand over the open book in her lap and listened to the running sink. When Andrea came back out her mascara was smudged.

"Did your final go long?" Charlotte asked.

"Why do you care?"

“I was worried. You know. You said you’d be home and-” Andrea looked distracted and Charlotte put her book down in her lap. She hadn’t read anything anyway. She thought about asking how it went or if she wanted to do something together tonight, but the words stuck in her throat. The ideas felt flimsy and she worried Andrea could see through her.

Charlotte pulled herself out of the sunken cushion and tucked her legs underneath, hugging her arms close. “There’s actually some pizza leftover if you want.”

Andrea nodded and removed her shoes, leaving them on the floor but stayed standing.

“Andrea?”

The edges of Andrea’s eyes twitched and she looked at Charlotte, as if only now noticing she was there. “What?”

“Pizza. There’s still some from mom’s thing.”

“Where is mom?”

“She went to bed a little bit ago. Are you okay?”

Andrea scowled and turned, tripping over her shoes on her way to the stairs. Charlotte leaned her head on the couch’s arm and waited for her sister to discover the empty glass box. She had no plan, didn’t know what to say when Andrea would see it. Her eyes felt dry but her throat tightened as the seconds, then minutes passed. Ellie would tell her Andrea’s anger would fade but Charlotte didn’t see things the way Ellie

saw them. Charlotte saw things in sparks, building as they jumped from one body to the next. Andrea left mad, and now she'd be even more upset and Charlotte had to stop her anger from growing.

Time slid by but Charlotte didn't move until a door handle hit the wall with a loud crack and Charlotte gasped. Andrea thundered down the stairs.

"What did you do?" She demanded.

"Mom's sleeping!" Charlotte squeaked.

"Answer me."

"he was gone when I started cleaning the floor. I tried looking for him but-"

"You killed him."

Charlotte shook. "No. No I didn't. He's fine, I'm sure." Andrea's face was pink as she gripped the back of the small chair. Charlotte forced herself to look at her sister and say again, no she did not kill Carl. Andrea's fingers curled and she pushed against the chair so it rocked forward. She tore the living room apart, ripping books off the shelves and pulling up the couch cushions. Charlotte almost fell as she stood up, barely getting out of Andrea's way.

"You were the last one that saw him. What did you do?" But Andrea never stayed still long enough for an answer. She rushed to the kitchen. Plastic scraped over the countertops, appliances rattled. Charlotte took small steps so she could see around

the bookcase and her sister's shoulders arched over in concentration. She turned and they looked at each other.

"I-I didn't do anything." Charlotte said before she could stop herself. Andrea sneered but part of her deflated. Late night shadows crossed her face but the rest of her pulled downward. Charlotte placed her hand on the wall. "What could I have done?"

Pieces of hair had fallen from Andrea's ponytail, frizzy and tangled. She raked her hands through the strands until Charlotte saw the tie fall on the tile. Andrea lowered her head in her hands and her shoulders shook with sobs. The space between them grew and Charlotte knew she should close it with a hug, tell her sister she'd help look for him. She tried comforting herself with the idea she could tell a half-truth. She should have double-checked the lid or reassure Andrea she tried her best.

Charlotte's knees ached as she stepped forward, convinced her body would shatter in a million pieces. Her fingertips grazed Andrea's shoulder, who pulled back so sharply she ran into the fridge.

"Don't touch me." She growled.

Andrea tore the house apart. She threw blankets and old hair products and dragged everything out before knocking on Maggie's door. Ellie didn't come home, leaving Charlotte alone as it got later and the living room froze in the darkness. She'd never noticed before how time stood still at night. During the day the sky changed color and people's appearances moved and relaxed. But at night everything froze, including Charlotte who stayed curled in the couch's corner, afraid to go upstairs and sleep in the

same room as her sister. To be so close to a heartache she had caused. Charlotte glanced at the garage door, the gold knob curving the black lamp stand across the room.

There was no light in the garage, the high up light bulb had burned out months ago, and so Charlotte went searching for a flashlight. She rifled through boxes and looked in their junk drawers. She finally found a heavy black one under the sink, the rubber sticky with humidity. Charlotte pressed the button on the side but nothing happened. She pressed harder, biting her lip at the same time, but the flashlight remained dark. She stood and kept clicking the flashlight telling herself *on off, on off, on off*. If they had batteries, they would have been in one of the places she'd already looked and when she checked the television remote, she saw they weren't the kind she needed.

She stood still and kept clicking the flashlight, imagining Carl sliding through the walls at the sound of Andrea's voice. Maybe that's what would happen, Charlotte hoped, he was only waiting for someone to call him.

Ellie

On Monday Ellie sat in her car and wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt. Construction workers milled around outside, building a new front porch. Ellie admired the house's dark blue shutters behind the naked wood, noting how wide the porch extended as she walked from her car and made a wide circle to the house's side. Theresa appeared around the corner, tall with square shoulders and an urgent stride. She waved, the child propped on her hip.

"This is Jane. Janie." Theresa waved the girl's doughy hand before leading them inside. "Thank you so much, I've had no idea who to call. Most students already have jobs or are out of town or, did you know this?, St. Wenc doesn't get out for another week!"

"Ah no, I didn't know that."

"Charlotte hasn't been complaining? My twins used to make countdowns for summer, but I swear they didn't go this late into May! Anyway," Theresa gestured for Ellie to take her shoes off, "We have this construction going on and I'm dying to get back to work and daycares make me so nervous."

Ellie nodded, overwhelmed by Theresa's barrage of information and insecurities. She often admired people who opened up right away, but she'd never known how to

participate. She lined her black flats up against the wall while Theresa yanked open the living room shades. Natural light filtered through the gauzy layer still covering the window. The workers' silhouettes passed by.

"It's such a nice afternoon. I wish I could let more light in but I feel weird letting them see inside."

The walls were off-white, something Ellie suspected had been a specific choice of Theresa's, and the furniture was a mix of modern and traditional florals and shapes. Ellie sat on an overstuffed grey sofa and smoothed a throw pillow stitched with green vines. Theresa perched opposite her in a deep arm chair and began describing Jane's typical day, but Ellie was distracted by the clocks, which covered the walls. There were dozens in a variety of shapes and sizes in precise lines. Light reflected off their glossy surfaces, arms moving in tandem. Ellie's neck felt sore and it wasn't until she straightened that she realized she'd been leaning away from them. The ticking wasn't loud but she felt as though the sound came at her, their faces insistent they should be the ones conveying the time.

"I sent my twins to an in-home babysitter back in the day. And she was wonderful but now I feel like I keep reading horror stories about those babysitters poisoning or neglecting the kids. Have you seen that? Doesn't it seem like an epidemic?" Jane leaned against her mom and stared at Ellie with large, brown eyes.

She must have been used to the clocks.

"I...I may have seen something. But not recently."

“Oh they’re everywhere! You should really keep up, I hate being uninformed.”

She shifted Jane from one leg to the other. “Okay, so. I’m looking for someone who can watch Janie while I’m keeping an eye on the construction or when I work. I work part time, which is great, but it also means your schedule might be a little uneven. Can you handle that?”

“Sure. I don’t have anything going on.” Ellie half-laughed and pulled her skirt over her legs.

“And only during the day. I know you have a life outside work, so you’ll be done by five. Or six. Maybe six-thirty some days.”

The construction workers’ voices filled the room. A tool fell and Ellie jumped at the ringing, but Theresa didn’t flinch even as Jane started whimpering. Ellie thought Jane could be at least a year old, maybe younger. She regretted not looking up childhood stages, which felt like high-stakes and she wondered if stunting Jane’s growth was possible. The baby’s face unfolded the longer Theresa bobbed her knee. She had rounded, apple-like cheeks that hid the corners of her mouth, and thick brown hair that curled at the bottom. Occasionally her eyes would stray toward the clocks, but most of the time she kept her gaze on Ellie.

“You’re not doing anything with law school right now, are you?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“It’s fine if you are. But, you know, I need someone who is really attentive. I have so much going on and Charlie, my husband, is in-and-out.”

Over Theresa’s head hovered a large clock made of light paneled wood and marked with roman numerals. Ellie assured Theresa she loved babies. She’d be at Jane’s beck-and-call.

“Well don’t spoil her,” Theresa teased.

“No. I wouldn’t. I just mean that you don’t have to worry. I don’t have a lot going on right now,” Ellie felt warmth creep up her cheeks.

“Janie is the best but I don’t usually care for other people’s kids. Even when the twins were babies they’d go on playdates and all those other babies looked so...sticky. And were so loud.”

A bang from outside made them all jump and annoyance twisted over Theresa’s face while her grip tightened on Jane’s leg. Jane’s cries flooded the room, mangled with the workers’ shouting. Theresa handed Jane over and hurried outside. The screen door closed but her own voice pierced through the mesh, halting the construction. Ellie struggled while Jane squirmed, leaning over her arms and screaming after her mom, the sound bursting from her reddened face.

Ellie lowered herself from the couch and on her knees, placing Jane on the floor. The baby launched herself toward the door and Ellie scrambled after her, dragging her

back. They repeated this, Ellie pulling her away when Jane got too close to the door.

Around them, the clocks' arms moved from one minute to the next.

While Jane searched for her mother, Ellie studied the house. It wasn't big and more closed off than her own home. From where she sat she could only see the edge of the table in the kitchen. She imagined if she stood in the front door she could see a straight line all the way to the back yard. Ellie leaned forward, her chest pressing against Jane, and saw the lush emerald yard pop behind the white tile. The house felt micro-managed, each isolated room fitted for its purpose, and Ellie both appreciated that and felt wary. She looked down at Jane and wondered if they'd be this close all summer. She'd stopped crying but still pulled away from Ellie, her face distraught.

On an end table nearby Ellie spotted a picture of the twins and their parents. They had graduated a year before Ellie, so she recognized them standing in front of Cinderella's Castle at Disney World. It was an old picture, both girls had crooked teeth and wore matching shirts. Their identical faces looked tanned and each had their arm around a parent.

"Oh Baby, I'm right here," Theresa appeared and picked Jane up, "My gosh you are patient. That's good because she's teething and cries all the time. It'll stop soon though, don't worry."

Ellie stood, "Did Kat and Frannie grow up here?"

"Oh no. Not at all. We moved here around the same time Kat moved to Colorado. We lived in that neighborhood over by Sacred Heart, which was so beautiful

and both girls got their own bathroom. But we thought it was best to downsize at the time. Tea?”

Theresa had gone into the kitchen and was already pouring two glasses of the amber-tinted tea. Ellie accepted one, the condensation collecting around her fingers. She inhaled the deep, sunshine scent, and took a large drink. She could remember Theresa’s energy from her mom’s but maybe she felt more comfortable in her own house, but the energy also didn’t seem like comfort. It was like her mind moved faster than her body, which struggled keeping up, pulling from one task to the next. Ellie leaned on the counter and placed her glass on a waiting coaster. If the job meant making sure Theresa didn’t miss her mark just as much as it meant taking care of Jane, Ellie felt more confident. She could help facilitate Theresa’s life.

Ellie placed her finger over the water ring forming on the mosaic coaster. Maybe not facilitate, but offer guidance, encouragement. She could do that.

Theresa placed a bowl of banana on the counter, holding a slice up to Jane’s mouth. “I’m sure your mom told you since it’s no secret Janie wasn’t exactly planned. But NFP is so complicated and frankly, I didn’t think it’d matter anymore.”

“No. She...didn’t tell me that,” Ellie paused, but Theresa didn’t respond. “I did have some friends who graduated with me that got pregnant soon after. It happens, I guess.”

Theresa slid her downturned hand across the granite countertop. “Well it’s nothing you need to worry about for a while.” She looked worried and older as she

pushed her lips together and Ellie squirmed under her gaze. She'd had two boyfriends in the past that she called "serious-ish" and had sex with both. They were charming and cute at the time but Ellie found them mildly regrettable in retrospect. Her conservative friends would say she regretted them because she hadn't been in love, but Ellie knew it was because the boys were boring. She had met them at separate bars, at separate times in her life but they both wound up working at the same business developing sports software. Ellie hadn't dated much since them because the chance they'd all know each other felt high. Not to mention she suspected the next experience would be exactly like the first two.

Ellie looked through the sliding glass door and saw a bike path behind their fence, rolling down the manicured waves of grass. Warm afternoon sunlight spread across the tile and warmed Ellie's bare feet while Theresa gave a tour of the kitchen, admitting she loved ice cream and where to find Jane's emergency information by the fridge. Ellie didn't doubt she could do this, Jane was cute and Theresa moved fast but perhaps she could be a steady pillar for them.

Andrea

Conspiracy theories surrounded the bookstore, which had officially been called arson, but Andrea felt an emptiness when she saw the blown-out windows, how widespread the damage was. Arson felt incomplete and she spent her afternoons putting together the pieces and coming up with a fuller response. Information was everywhere in the week following, which made Andrea feel connected through the internet's shared fascination. But she still cleared her search history before her family came home from work.

If they asked what she did all day she told them she'd filled out internship applications or tutored for a summer class. The answers always fell from her mouth suddenly, and she wasn't sure if she really wanted people knowing the truth or not, which was that she researched how to make a bomb at home, read Lincoln's criminal records from the last five years, or collapsed for a three hour nap, numb and drained.

There were articles, interviews, even demonstrations from the fire department in the name of caution but by the first week of June, summer intruded, people forgot, and illegal fireworks exploded in fields a few miles from her bedroom window. She woke up, jarred, and opened her laptop until she fell asleep with the blue glow washed over her face.

The suspect, a recent graduate from North High, reminded her of the guys who ran track at St. Wensc. The official photo was cropped at his shoulders, but Andrea had found other pictures where he towered over others. He was lanky too, his arms too long for his body. The newspaper printed a black-and-white picture and it wasn't until she found Charlotte watching the news that she he was super blonde: blonde hair, blonde eyebrows, blonde eyelashes. His eyes were light blue. He didn't look angry or tired, but unfinished, and Andrea noticed reporters struggled pinning a narrative on him. He didn't have deep, sad eyes or a bright, forward-thinking expression. They said he'd been *promising* in school.

No one knew what to do with him, and so they didn't do anything. Soon, the story got pushed further away until the trial updates could only be found in the paper's *Local* section on the last page. His incomplete expression in the corner.

Andrea waited in the shoe section of Markman's, flexing her foot and studying the crisscrossed brown sandals. Two women approached from behind and fell into a chair that rattled against Andrea's back.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, dear!"

Andrea waved her off but the woman placed a cold hand on her arm and kept talking. "I am so clumsy. Don't mind me. It's been such a long day and I couldn't wait to sit down."

This happened a lot when Andrea had to pick her mom up from work, more than Ellie and Charlotte. Older women divulged their entire days from the stiff chairs, their complains all the same. Long days. Rude employees. Their sore feet. She didn't think she gave off the impression of friendly conversation, especially now since she was convinced Carl was out there, cold and lonely, and she felt anger flare at unexpected times.

"Those are cute," the woman pointed at the sandals, "and so stylish."

"Yeah, I like them." She caught the salesman's eye. She technically couldn't afford them, and it was a gamble if Maggie would ask about the expense or forget. She kicked them off, put them back in the box, and felt the woman lean over her chair.

"It looks like he thinks you look good too."

"Oh well if he likes them..." she replied, regretting the heavy sarcasm. The woman held her smile a second too long before turning back. Andrea sighed and carried the box to the counter.

"My mom has an account here. Maggie, Margaret O'Donnell."

The man's nametag read Bryan, "I thought you looked familiar. Are you her daughter?"

Andrea tapped her fingers, uncertain how he'd know that since he looked new. She scanned the store. Maggie was late, but that happened a lot. Red, white, and blue signs promoted an upcoming Fourth of July sale and a boy in the children's section pulled picture books off the shelves and dropped them on the floor. When he took a

hardcover book and started banging it against the metal shelves, goosebumps lined Andrea's arms.

"Have you seen her? Do you know how long she'll be?"

"Not recently. But I know how she hates doing the schedule so she might be a while longer. There were a lot of last minute requests."

"Did you do that?"

Bryan chuckled as he handed the plastic bag containing the shoes to Andrea, but stopped when he saw she wasn't smiling. "Ah, well, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't done it before."

She said goodbye and rushed out the store. Her feet smacked the hot pavement and the heat exaggerated the distance between herself and the car on the far side of the lot. A wasp darted from the side mirror to the roof. Her arm shook as she carefully opened the trunk and tucked the bag in the corner. Closing the trunk, she felt sick, as if the hot and humid air leaked through her skin and got caught in her stomach. Dusty pink began to close over the blue in the sky, making the surrounding buildings feel hazy and blurred. She blinked and placed her hand on the car, feeling the heat grow along her skin until she yanked it back.

It was another half hour before Maggie came out, her purse swinging from her fingers. She waved and the setting sun reflected off her larger, black sunglasses.

“You didn’t have to wait out here. It’s so hot. You should’ve come inside.”

Maggie kissed Andrea’s temple and went to the passenger’s side.

“I was inside for a while. But you keep the air conditioning too cold.”

Maggie kicked off her shoes and stretched her legs. Andrea let her go through the radio stations as they drove past the lake surrounded by browning baseball fields.

“How are you doing?” Maggie asked at a red light.

“Fine.” The car rattled over the train tracks while silence followed.

“You’re coming to Charlotte’s awards night, right?”

“What’s Charlotte getting awarded for?” She felt her mom tense beside her and grip the door handle.

“I’m not sure. But she asked if we were going and you know your sister doesn’t bring stuff up unless it’s important.” Maggie pulled the visor mirror down and flipped it up without checking her face. Andrea took a sharp turn and heard her mom’s heels thump against the door. Andrea did not feel like celebrating Charlotte but her mom kept elaborating on the evening, telling Andrea she’d regret it if she didn’t go, maybe they could go out for dessert after?

“I think your dad’s coming too. I’m sure he’ll be asking so you should invite him to get ice cream or something if he wants.”

“Dad’s not going to want to do that.” It’d been almost fifteen years since her parent’s divorce and they still couldn’t be in the same room together. Maggie’s nerves

frayed and she twisted the air around her into a frenzy while their dad scoffed and paced, counting the minutes until he did his time. Her mom insisted it'd be better this time and so often her mom seemed put together and in control, Andrea believed her.

Andrea couldn't deal. "Do you know where my good sketchbook is? The big one?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Are you going to start drawing again?"

"Maybe."

"I think that's so great. I bet you'll realize how much you've missed it."

Maggie turned toward her, the seatbelt straining. Andrea twisted her hands around the wheel and sailed through a yellow light. Maggie's chatter was normal after work, like her way of decompressing. But Andrea felt like a placeholder, like Maggie would have talked to anyone and Andrea just happened to be there. Since Carl's disappearance, her mom had been comforting and encouraging, but now the attention felt aggressive and she wanted her mom to be quiet for a second.

Tears blurred her vision Andrea watched the unchanging red light, cars blended together in a stream of color but Andrea didn't wipe her face even when she felt tears drip down her cheeks, tickling her jaw. She didn't notice until she pulled forward that her mom's hand was on her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Andrea," Maggie said, "I know you really loved him."

Andrea felt stupid. Her mom made it sound like someone real had died, a person or even a dog. It was just a snake, she told herself. Pull yourself together.

But the thoughts dissolved as Maggie kept talking, her airy voice falling over her. Andrea's body filled with her mom's words, wanting more, waiting for her mom to push out the grief and replace it with something else. Something more manageable.

"I don't know why I'm so upset. I feel like a baby."

Maggie sighed, "Losing anything is difficult. You have every right to be upset."

"Still though?"

"He might still be out there, sweetheart. We'll find him. Ellie was telling me how she searched your guys' bathroom the other day. We're on your side."

Andrea picked at the peeling vinyl, watching their neighborhood rise up on the small hill. She couldn't see their house but she saw the identical houses that stood in front. The one of the corner had a blue plastic kiddie pool in the yard. The still water glittered as nearby porch lights flashed on.

"I don't want a new snake, mom."

"No, of course not. Carl is yours."

Andrea nodded, grateful her mother understood and parked their car on the street, away from their house. She left her seatbelt on and fought back tears. Maggie reached over the center console and hugged Andrea, pulling her closer in an

uncomfortable embrace. Andrea cried, grateful her mom was the only one who could hear her.

At home she found her notebook crammed in their closet. The pages were already crowded with drawings and notes from random inspiration and the occasional art assignment, but the blank ones were spacious, heavy paper. Andrea found their smoothness inviting. She sat on the floor, found an empty page and began sketching the bookstore as she remembered it before the fire. It had been a sharp red brick with a purple awning, tall and rectangular. She outlined the building's body in pencil, emphasizing its bones and focused on what made it stand. She imagined it filled, the opposite of the skeletal image she'd seen after the fire.

It was sort of funny when she'd opened the newspaper and learned the boy used gasoline. Nothing but gasoline and matches. The image was so cartoonish and simple, impossible to imagine the gangly blonde boy could cause so much damage. But it was also wrong, and as she read article after article she felt like she'd discovered something other's hadn't.

"It's not funny," Charlotte had lectured when Andrea tried explaining.

"Not *funny* funny. But, you know..." she trailed off.

When the boy was arrested, it felt like relief. Lucas Williams, that was his name, but Andrea found in the op-eds and comment sections how Lucas' emptiness fueled

others. Charlotte came home more than once enraged by what people said at school, saying someone blamed the neighborhood and the shop owner for not taking care of their buildings. No one could decide what to call it. Terrorism? Irresponsible teenager taking a joke too far? Andrea drew the boy's face in her sketchbook. But he wasn't a boy, he had graduated high school, but the word stuck in her head. "Boy" kept appearing in everything, that was the one thing everyone agreed on.

Andrea arched her back until it cracked and looked at her unfinished work. The old, familiar feeling of disappointment crept into her chest. She tucked the book in a tote bag, left the closet, and told her mom in passing that she had somewhere to be.

The crumbled brick had been swept away and left the remaining struct weak and vulnerable to the ash residue crawling up the front. From a bench across the street, Andrea started a different drawing. The road was narrow and in the dim light Andrea felt if she leaned forward she could touch the store's walls. The display window was gone and she tried drawing the window pane without glass. But she always struggled with negative space.

The surrounding neighborhood was quiet except for the breeze rustling the leaves overhead. The air smelled like exhaust fumes but in a warm, musky way that reminded her of candles. She looked up and saw a porch light flicker on in the distance. The houses in her own neighborhood were all the same and pushed together on small, efficient streets. But the houses here varied, distressed and worn, their frayed edges

drifting into each other. She had friends who would say the area looked scary, but to her it looked tired, the strong parts pulled over the holes, protecting but ready to fall apart. Andrea propped her heels on the bench, careful not to disturb anything.

Across the street a girl about Andrea's age strolled down the sidewalk. Her long arm bent in front of her, cradling what must have been a phone or a small radio since music blasted through the dark. She sang off-key and couldn't see Andrea. A long braid fell down her back and swung as she nodded along with her music. Her body maintained pace even as she passed the bookstore, hopping over the remaining debris. Andrea rubbed her eyes until spots appeared behind her eyelids.

When she opened them the girl was gone and the music with her. Most of the light came from the opaque streetlights, but Andrea turned to a clean page and began to draw the girl's face. She hadn't been able to see her expression but it struck Andrea that a girl with so much volume and movement would have an easy face. She gave the girl a wide mouth, smooth lips, and deep-set eyes. She pulled the girl's hair back and drew her skin tight against strong cheekbones.

Charlotte

On the last day of school Charlotte picked at her sandwich and half-listened to Joy's excited chatter. The cafeteria was louder than usual and more crowded since so many students had skipped class and hangout for an extended lunch instead. The nuns glared and lectured, wanting to maintain some structure even on the last day. But the priests laughed and pointed out the rebellious students with their shared jokes in a way that made Charlotte uncomfortable. She didn't like the chaos either and wanted to muffle the noise.

Charlotte sat up and cracked her back. Between the broken air conditioning and the light pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows, her white polo shirt was damp with sweat.

"Are you going to awards night?" Joy asked. "I might, but it's never as exciting as I think it's going to be."

"My dad said he's coming. So I think I have to go."

"Oh wow. I didn't know your family was so into it."

"They're not. I mean, you never know with my dad. He shows up at the most random things."

One of the nuns walked by their table, slowing when she saw their friend Carter texting under the table.

“Awards night is lame,” he said once the nun left. Charlotte agreed. Joy had more school spirit than here and was always the first to suggest a Friday night football game or a costume idea for Homecoming week. But an awards show for attendance certificates and science student medals seemed a little too spirit-y even for Joy.

“You want this?” Joy held out her pudding cup and Charlotte accepted. “Are you okay? You look distracted.”

“This is just the way my face is.” When Joy didn’t laugh she ripped the plastic off the pudding and sighed. “I think I’m jus nervous my dad is coming. If it was just him and me, it’d be fine. He’s awkward but I think we get along. But mom and Ellie get so stressed out about him.”

“When was the last time he was in town?”

“Last summer. He didn’t come back for Christmas. Cleveland is too far I guess.” She wanted to explain that she’d been disappointed that Christmas too and hoped her dad would come or invite them to Cleveland for a few days. Noise rose up as a large group in the corner yelled, something hidden underneath their bodies crowded around their table. It was difficult to explain to Joy or her sisters why she wasn’t as mad at their father the way they were, and when she tried her mom always got this glazed half-smile, like she was forcing herself to be grateful.

Charlotte inched her phone from her pocket and glanced at the text from Theo asking if she'd be at Full Moon tonight. She hadn't seen him since he visited her at work and she was beginning to feel annoyed, like he expected her to wait for him to tell her what they were doing next. Still, she wondered if her dad would be interested in seeing the coffee shop.

Joy tapped the table with her nail. "Hey! Maybe you could take your dad to that new restaurant on O Street? The Irish place?"

"I've been there. It's fine but the Irish aren't exactly known for their food."

"No. There's a new one. Across the street. It's nicer and they don't have TVs everywhere."

Charlotte took a bite and spoke with her mouth full, which made Joy flinch but giggle. "I always feel weird when dad takes us out. He's a pharmacist so he has money but I still always order the cheapest thing on the menu."

Joy turned when a friend asked if she had heard if the French teacher had her baby yet. Charlotte grew annoyed as Joy leaned away from her even though she knew that wasn't fair. Joy was probably what she needed right now: positive, upbeat. But Charlotte couldn't shake the feeling of being detached and left out as the rest of the school rushed toward summer. She scanned the cafeteria and made sure no one was watching before texting Theo that she'd be at Full Moon later.

“Summer is so boring.” Charlotte said. Carter mock-gasped and listed off all the things he planned to do: bike ride, pool membership, sleep. He pushed back his floppy blonde hair and leaned forward.

“Dude. My family’s going on this big road trip to see my cousins in South Dakota. They bought this old camper and we’re going up to Fort Robinson which is supposed to be super haunted.”

Charlotte widened her eyes and tried responding the best she could but she wasn’t sure if he was trying to prove her wrong or offer suggestions. She didn’t have a bike or family in South Dakota, so then what was she supposed to do?

Joy zipped her lunch box closed. “Maybe it’s okay to be bored sometimes.”

When the final bell rang Charlotte stood in near her locker and let the junior class rush past her and through the narrow doors to the parking lot. She told Joy she forgot something and she’d text her, but really she didn’t want to face Andrea’s angry silence. Charlotte waited until she felt she’d heard the last locker slam before shuffling outside.

Charlotte felt impatient with Andrea’s freeze-out but forced herself to keep from speeding up the process. A week after she’d released Carl she was surprised how she felt less afraid Andrea would find out it was her. If more time reduced the likelihood Andrea suspected Charlotte had done something, then more time was what she

needed. So they drove home in silence except for the occasional click of Andrea biting her nails.

At home, Charlotte dumped her backpack by the door and sprinted upstairs, finding Ellie laying on her own bed, a pillow covering her eyes.

“Ellie! Are you asleep?”

She shook her head but didn’t remove the pillow. “I wish. Jane’s teething and won’t stop crying. I’m so tired.”

“Oh. Sorry. But can you help me with something? Do you have a razor?”

“For your...legs?”

“My head.”

Ellie sat up, letting the pillow fall. She scrunched her face and Charlotte squirmed under her stare. Her sister waved Charlotte over and she hopped on the edge of the bed. She smiled and folded her hands in her lap while Ellie picked up a section of thin blonde hair.

“I don’t. But Noah might.”

Excitement burst in her chest as she explained what she envisioned. She wanted it shaved, not shiny bald, she explained, but gone so she couldn’t feel anything when she shook her head.

Ellie smiled. “Oh yeah. I think you could totally pull off a Sinead O’Connor thing.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. I’ll text Noah.”

Charlotte ran to their closet and rifled through the clothes, searching for an outfit that would match her new look. She kicked a pair of Andrea’s black heels away and looked for her white blouse. After two rounds of passing through her section of the closet, she realized the shirt she was looking for was on Andrea’s side.

“Where did you get this idea?” Ellie leaned against the wall and stuck her bare feet across the bed.

“I don’t know. I just did. It’s summer. You have to do *something* in the summer.” She brought out a dark green dress, a white button-up shirt, and a pair of skinny orange pants.

“And you’re sure?”

Charlotte tossed the orange pants on the floor.

“I know hair grows back and all but it’ll take a long time. Not to mention the upkeep once it does start to grow back.”

“I’m sure. It’ll be fine.”

“I just don’t want you to regret it.” Ellie slid off the bed and walked over, placing her hands on Charlotte’s shoulders.

“What are you doing?”

“I just want to make sure you have the right bone structure.”

Charlotte yanked herself free and smoothed her hand over the green dress. She didn't even know what the 'right' bone structure even was. Doubt pricked the back of her mind but Charlotte shook it off, frustrated with her sister for slowing her momentum. From downstairs she heard Andrea's pitchy whine *Mom* but no response. Charlotte wished she could have her own thing for just a second.

“You were so cool with it two seconds ago. So what if it's a mistake? Aren't I supposed to make stupid mistakes?”

Ellie held up her hands in surrender but stayed nearby, as Charlotte unfolded a pair of skinny jeans and felt satisfaction come back to her. She'd look great with a shaved head.

“That'd look great,” Ellie pointed at black jeans and the white blouse Charlotte had found on Andrea's side. It was thin and breezy and crossed over the front so the fabric draped in layers over her chest. “And you're right. You can do what you want.” She laughed, “Careful with the black though. You'll have to brace yourself if people think you're some kind of Riot Grrrl.”

“A what?”

“Never mind. It's cool.” She scrolled through her phone. “Noah says he'll be here soon.”

Ellie left and Charlotte studied herself in the full-length mirror that leaned against the wall. She twisted a piece of hair around her finger, moving her head around and imaging the future weightlessness. She leaned closer, small spidery mascara streaks were visible on the glass. A shaved head might give her more options, she thought. She imagined herself in a floral dress or in something soft, baby blue. When she first thought of the idea she felt most excited by the shock value, and while she was still looking forward to looks on everyone's faces, she also liked how blank the look would make her. She felt like maybe it'd give her look more options.

Noah plugged his razor in the bathroom wall and clicked it on and off. Charlotte shivered under the towel draped over her shoulders.

"You ready?" he asked and Charlotte nodded, staring at her reflection and ignoring the obvious glances Ellie and Noah gave each other. Ellie ran a wet comb through Charlotte's hair and a big drop of water ran over her forehead. Her blonde hair looked darker wet and stuck to the sides of her face. Ellie held out a pair of scissors.

"Want to make the first cut?"

"You can't just...go for it?"

Noah shook his head, "Don't want to break my trimmer! You might clog it with your lion mane." Now Ellie and Charlotte exchanged a glance.

"I thought you had a razor. I don't want a trim."

Ellie smoothed her hand over Charlotte's head which comforted Charlotte and she sat back against the metal folding chair. "It'll be okay. Here," she waited until Charlotte accepted the scissors, "you'll get what you want. You can trust Noah."

Charlotte opened and closed the small pink scissors, noting the dull edges. When she looked up she saw Ellie holding up a chunk of hair.

"Just slice through it."

Charlotte crossed her arm over her face and closed them so hard she felt her muscle by her thumb pinch. The detached strands lied limp in Ellie's palm while the remaining ones stood straight from the side of her skull. Charlotte was embarrassed by how jagged the cut looked until sadness swept over her and she wished she had concentrated more on the moment. She didn't notice what it sounded like, how it felt removing something from herself. She felt like there was a 'before' and 'after' now but she couldn't tell what happened in the space in between.

Ellie smiled but took a deep breath before speaking, "Do you want to do another one?"

"Can you do it now?"

Charlotte watched Ellie remove portions of her hair, appreciating how gently she tossed the strands into the wastebasket. Noah nodded after each cut, growing more excited and bobbing on his toes, the trimmer poised in his hand. He was so tall and looked so strange in their bright bathroom, framed by the towels Andrea called

“clementine” and old hair products scattered on the counter behind him. Charlotte blushed when she saw the opened Tampax box in the corner.

“Careful,” Ellie pressed Charlotte’s shoulders down.

“You’re good at this.”

“Thanks. I cut my own hair in undergrad. I screwed up all the time but I was never that emotionally attached in the first place.” She tilted Charlotte’s head forward and to the side, running her fingers over the stubby but even strands. Ellie had her own hair pulled back in a low ponytail and a few smaller strands had fallen loose and curled around her ears from the humidity. Andrea told Charlotte once she worried Ellie had stopped trying, stopped putting herself together. But Charlotte kept admiring how smooth and clean her sister’s skin looked. Her cheeks flushed slightly and even though she did look tired, her blue eyes reminded Charlotte of marbles.

Noah blew into the razor a few hairs sprinkled onto the counter. When Ellie finished Charlotte saw her own face uncovered and her scalp frayed like Andrea’s dolls when she cut their hair years ago. Charlotte covered her face. The bathroom felt cold and she reminded herself it wasn’t finished yet. This was the messy, ugly part.

It was quiet and Noah waited for Charlotte to uncover her face. She took a deep breath and let her hands fall in her lap. At first the blade tickled and she shrunk under the unfamiliar touch. But she forced herself to maintain eye contact with her reflection. She felt like she was playing Chicken and wondered which one of her would break first.

At the end, Ellie and Noah left Charlotte to rinse off. She got in the shower and turned the lever hotter and hotter, enjoying the heat on her scalp. Her hands hovered over her shorn scalp, hesitating a moment before finally touching it with only her fingertips. She slowly lowered her palms and swept her hands over, smiling as they swooped into the curve at the base of her skull.

Fog filled the room. She wiped the mirror and examined herself. She had expected to look sharper and she sort of was, her jaw stood out and when she turned she saw how straight her body was. But she also felt aware of her cheeks' softness and how round her grey eyes were. It's funny, she thought, how subtracting something from herself actually made her take up more space. The longer she stared at her reflection, the more she felt like she was placed in a doll's house, too big for the candy-colored bottles and threadbare towels. She got dressed in a pair of jean shorts and a t-shirt and made her way downstairs.

She heard Andrea before reaching the bottom and gripped the railing so her hand stuttered over the humid wood. Charlotte was grateful Andrea's back was turned when she entered the living room and it was Maggie who came in from the kitchen, saw Charlotte's new look, and covered her mouth in surprise. She shrieked, but it was a girlish, joy-filled sound that made Charlotte's face break out in a wide, silly smile. Maggie touched her daughter's head and smoothed her hand over the fuzz.

"Where did you get this idea?" Charlotte shrugged and looked down, heat growing throughout the room. "You're so cool." Maggie said and hugged her.

Andrea stayed in the chair positioned in front of Charlotte, which creaked as she twisted and glanced up at Charlotte. Ellie dropped her feet from the coffee table and jumped off the couch, leaving Noah behind, his legs folded against the couch. The attention felt strange for Charlotte, who often felt her spotlight shift quickly to Ellie or Andrea.

“I know I said Sinead O’Connor before,” Ellie said, “but I’m thinking you look more like Natalie Portman in *V for Vendetta*. Have you seen that? The movie is whatever but she’s gorgeous.”

Noah chuckled. “That’s a dark reference.”

“Well she looks a little dark – in a good way.”

While they debated which celebrity she looked most like, Charlotte wished she could turn the energy into something physical. She wanted it melted down, cast into something that she could wear or look at. She felt like she was expanding and adrenaline wound in her limbs like a loaded spring. She crossed and uncrossed her arms, her knuckles knocking against Andrea’s chair, who closed out her phone and pursed her lips.

“You do look good.” She finally said before slouching deeper.

The kitchen timer buzzed and Maggie clapped her hands and rushed toward it. “Dinner’s ready!” she called followed by the sound of water rushing over the sink.

Charlotte heard her apologize that it was just spaghetti. They needed something fast and easy for award's night, she justified.

"Mom, you don't have to apologize." Ellie rolled her eyes and retrieved plates from the cabinet. Charlotte leaned against the low bookcase with her hands in her pockets, uncertain if she should do something as she watched Ellie and her mom weave around each other in the small space. "Do you need help?"

"No, no. It's your night." Maggie poured red sauce from the small pot into a bowl they used for cereal. "Actually, could you grab the ladle?"

"We can just pour it ourselves," Andrea brushed past Charlotte and sat at the table, pushing papers to the side.

"We have a ladle and we're going to use it. Noah! You should stay."

Charlotte found the ladle and took the chair Noah offered, ducking her uncovered face as she settled in. She felt the strain of holding her head up and realized she'd need fake confidence until she really felt it. Ellie followed their mom and they waited for Maggie to fall in her chair and choose her food first. They passed around the bowls and Charlotte spun her noodles until they tangled around her fork but didn't eat. The room felt claustrophobic suddenly, like they were all competing for air.

"When is your dad coming?" Maggie asked after a moment. "You guys talk to him more than I do and I was just--"

"Probably soon. I don't know."

Charlotte saw Ellie glance at Noah, who pretended not to hear. Ellie set her fork down. “Hey, Charlotte, did you know that guy who set the fire at the bookstore? He was only a year older than you.”

“Two years.”

“Still. You know more people at the public schools than me and Andrea did.”

Charlotte said she could ask Theo and lied that she guessed Theo didn’t know him. Charlotte had never seen the guy who’d started the fire at Full Moon but Theo knew a lot of people and it seemed possible. “People always mush Theo and those other people together just because they’re all loud and cause traffic problems. But Theo isn’t like that guy. I can’t even remember his name-“

“Lucas.” Andrea’s voice stuck out. She sounded so certain that Charlotte stopped, thinking Andrea had ended the conversation.

“How do you know that?”

Andrea scowled.

“Whatever. Anyway, it’s not the same.”

Maggie waved her hands, redirecting the attention. “Hello? Can you figure out when your dad is coming? And let me know if we’re all getting dessert after? I don’t mind if he comes, really. If you want him there we can go together.”

Charlotte felt her mom's anxiety flood the circle. Ellie dragged a bowl closer and the sound punctured the silence and seemed to surprise Maggie, who smiled without her teeth. Charlotte said she'd let her know, promise.

"Mom, relax. It's fine."

Maggie squinted through the angled sunlight coming from the window behind Charlotte, the warmth wrapping over her neck in a heavy swath. She didn't mind it but it occurred to Charlotte that she'd need to wear sunscreen and the idea rubbing the lotion in her hair made her a little sick.

"It's going to take a bit to get used to your new power," Maggie flipped her hand toward Charlotte's face.

"Power?" Andrea snorted.

"She looks really powerful, doesn't she?" But it didn't sound like a question to Charlotte.

After dinner, Charlotte watched her dad through the small window at the base of the stairs. He was tall enough that he hunched under the car's hood and his leg extended from the open door, tapping against the pavement. Sun cast over the dash blocked his face but Charlotte could still see his animated expression as he spoke on the phone. He ended the call and moments later Charlotte felt her phone buzz.

here he had texted.

She straightened her blouse and yelled behind her that she was leaving. She slammed the door behind her before anyone could respond. Her sounded loud as she pounded along the path and paused by her dad's open door. Charlotte waited until he finished something on his phone and he looked up.

"When did you do *that*?" His gaze darted up her head and back to her black pants. He'd gotten greyer since the last time she saw him, and his eyes sunk deeply into his skull. His grey eyes looked almost black as the sun set behind them. "Your pants are too short."

"Do you like it? And they're supposed to be like this. They're cropped."

"What's your mother think?"

Charlotte responded by going around to the passenger door and distracting herself with her dad's rental car: a cobalt blue Kia that rolled too fluidly against her dad's rough edges. She ignored the disappointment blooming in her chest as she pulled the seatbelt across herself. Pick your battles, Ellie would tell her. Andrea would tell her to tell him to fuck off. Charlotte felt sweat prick along her back.

She liked it. I mean, I don't think it's her favorite but..." they drove out of her neighborhood and she gripped the seat as he took a sharp left. "You could've just gone straight."

Her dad huffed, "Should have told me sooner. Everything is different in this town." The muscles in his neck strained as traffic forced them still. The woman in the car

in front reached for something in her passenger's seat, missing her opening in the makeshift four-way stop. At the intersection, yellow lights flashed and the stress was interrupted by sporadic beeps and squealing brakes. Apparently no one knew how to drive anymore.

Her dad's silence wasn't unusual, he wasn't talkative, and Charlotte thought he preferred to experience things and have company surround him instead of forcing a conversation. But something in Lincoln had stressed him out. It could have been anything and Charlotte didn't care about figuring it out, she only hoped he'd calm down by the time they reached St. Wensc. She twisted her fingers until her knuckles popped and practiced asking him what the big deal with awards night was. Why had he come all this way? But no matter how it sounded in her head, she worried he'd flip it on her, remind her how Maggie hadn't invited him to Ellie's awards and wasn't she happy to see him?

Charlotte flipped the visor down, blocking the sun reflected off the windows and turned the air conditioning until the roar filled the car. Despite the initial tension, but she was glad he was there. He was different than everyone else and she liked the challenge. His silence meant she could talk more than she did at home.

But she worried he'd come mostly to prove something.

"I don't want to go to this thing," Charlotte said.

"What? Aren't you getting an award? Don't you have to be there to accept it?"

“They don’t actually tell you before. You’re supposed to go and then sit through the whole ceremony while the principal cries about how much he loves us.”

Her dad chuckled and the car lurched forward. “He cries?”

“Yeah. Over everything. It’s embarrassing because it happens when we have speakers come and he gets to talking about his ‘St. Wenceslaus Family.’” They reached the front of the intersection and Charlotte watched a pearly VW Bug drive by. She unstuck her back from the leather seat. “He’s really nice, though.”

Someone honked and her dad whipped around before settling, letting one hand fall to the bottom of the wheel. “So what’s it going to be?” He stalled while others drove around him, skipping his turn. His sunburned skin flushed against his sherbet-orange polo and Charlotte counted three red pinpricks where he had cut himself shaving. Against the cloudless, empty sky his face cut sharp, permitting sunlight only when he moved.

“Go right instead,” she commanded. “Downtown. There’s a thing at my coffee shop I want to see.”

“You sure?”

“Are *you* sure? You came all the way here for awards.”

She thought she saw relief flash over his face before straightening and turning right, cutting off another car and speed toward downtown. Thick, bushy trees filled gaps and divided the neighborhoods from the low, industrial buildings crowded near the

road. Flashy fast-food signs sprung up taller than everything else. Charlotte exhaled once they drove under the bridge that transported them into a different part of town: the softer, quieter, darker part.

“It’s on you if your mother comes after me.”

“Calm down. She won’t.” Charlotte watched the houses move closer as the road narrowed. Her dad should have bristled at her statement and she was surprised when he changed the subject instead of criticizing her.

“You look into colleges yet?”

“Some. I don’t know. Here and there.”

“You shouldn’t slack on that.”

Charlotte opened a text to her mom but her thumbs didn’t move. She never thought about college unless her dad brought it up. Her mom didn’t mention it and Charlotte wondered that was because Maggie worried Charlotte would be like Ellie which was annoying because college wasn’t exactly a priority. In fact, she didn’t think she was the college type and didn’t want to be like Andrea either, all stressed and busy without a guarantee that it was all worth it. But that was different than giving up the way Ellie had. Neither her mom or dad would understand that though.

“I might start at the Community College. Do the academic transfer thing.”

“You should look at something out of state.”

“Mhm.”

“You like politics, right? That’s something you need to leave Nebraska for.”

At a red light she saw a kid ride down the sidewalk on a plastic tricycle while a woman jogged past with her dog. Charlotte rolled down her window and inhaled a barbeque smell. How is this the same Lincoln? Heat hovered between the thick leaves. Large swaths of shade draped over the road, darkening the potholes and forcing everyone slower.

The child tipped and fell. His round head swiveled toward a house where a young woman gestured for him to stand. He looked down at his tiny hands splayed across the pavement and screamed. The woman’s head fell into her hands.

He’s crying, Charlotte thought, help your kid.

The light changed and her dad drove through too fast. Charlotte gripped the door handle and asked how his flight had been, what he wanted to do while he was in town. She ran through topics hoping they’d bury anything else about college.

Full Moon Coffee Shop made the best mochas and cinnamon scones. Charlotte often teased Joy for drinking more sugar than actual coffee but she couldn’t deny the house-made chocolate syrup. Housed underground, below a small art gallery, she loved the way her stomach dropped and her face instantly cooled the moment she placed her foot on the third stair, the one the sun couldn’t reach. Her favorite table was on the far side, against the stone wall, where she could sink into the shadows while still keeping an

eye on the stage – a low mahogany platform big enough for one three-legged stool and a microphone.

Her dad crouched under the twinkle lights dangling over the entry. As he straightened, he tucked his polo deeper into his pants. His stomach strained slightly against the fabric and the bright colors looked out of place against the muted earth tones of the shop. He inhaled, filling the space, and Charlotte thought she saw nearby tables look at him, their eyes wide. She crossed her arms and led them to the counter.

“An iced mocha,” Charlotte ordered and waited for her dad.

“What’s good here?” his voice was loud. The barista smiled too wide and chirped something about their macchiatos but he waved her off and said he just wanted normal coffee and taking out his wallet. “Anything else?” he asked Charlotte.

“No. That’s fine.”

“You sure?”

Charlotte widened her eyes and walked away. Most of the guys she knew were scrawny and gathered attention by being shy. Her dad was different and put in an effort to take up space and in the confines of Fully Moon, Charlotte felt claustrophobic. He never understood that when he did that, he took space away from someone else and Charlotte found a table, hoping to give herself breathing room. Her dad paid and took long steps to the carafes lined up on the counter.

She placed her phone on the table and the bright screen blinded her before she blinked, eyes watering, and saw she had missed messages from her mom and sisters. They asked where she was sitting in the St. Wensc gym. Then Ellie said they'd seen Joy, but not her. And then one from her mom that just read *Call me. Now.*

She typed and deleted her responses.

Dad didn't seem interested.

I wasn't interested.

The awards don't mean anything anyway.

Her dad sat down and leaned back, the thin chair creaked under his weight. He'd filled his mug to the brim and some dripped on the table. Behind him, the stage lit up and a kid unwound a long cord attached to the microphone.

I would just rather hang out with dad. Not at school. Charlotte wrote and pressed 'send' before she could overthink it. Seconds later, Ellie's face flashed on the screen but Charlotte ignored it and flipped the phone face-down in her lap.

"You come here a lot?" Her dad asked.

Charlotte rubbed the empty space above her ear. "Yeah. When my friends want me to. They have poetry readings or some play guitar," she cleared her throat. "My friend, Theo, he sometimes does these monologues...speeches. Usually about something political."

He held up his mug and looked at Charlotte over the rim.

“Hm.”

“N-not like, pundit-y or anything. He’s cool. He really believes in positive change in Lincoln. Some of his ideas are kind of lame but he’s good at motivating people.”

He chuckled. “You trying to sell me on something?”

“You asked.”

“I want to know about your life.”

Charlotte sipped her mocha and considered her dad might not get Theo. Her dad was declarative and arguments often ending with him blaming someone for not telling him the whole truth. But Theo rarely demanded or blamed. He was fluid, and Charlotte thought most people didn’t know what he wanted until they had already given it to him. Like the flowers at the Governor’s mansion. If he had asked straight out, she may not have gone. Asking required too much time to reconsider, and Charlotte thought it was best to jump straight in, wanting everything but expecting nothing.

Chairs scraped the floor and Charlotte saw a few groups turn as Theo stood in the entrance. At first, she felt he looked through her while he stayed in the doorway with his shoulders hunched and half-waved at someone nearby. When he recognized her, he frowned before an amused smile stretched across his face. As he strolled over, Charlotte hoped she looked sharp, made from precise, deliberate lines.

“Holy shit,” Theo said when he reached their table. His stare lingered a second too long before Charlotte’s dad stood, rocking the table. He jumped and extended his hand. “I’m sorry. I’m Theo. Charlotte’s friend. She did not look like this yesterday.”

“Wes. Don’t apologize. It warrants a ‘holy shit.’”

“Did you just get into town?”

“A few hours ago. Came in for a school thing of hers but apparently she doesn’t want to go anymore.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes and stood too, which felt stupid but didn’t want to keep looking up at them. “It was a stupid school event. You know my school, Theo.”

She wanted to explain her dad’s rough tone was meant to be joking, but he didn’t appear put off. And while she admired his ability to navigate the conversation, she grew annoyed they had started talking about her like she wasn’t there.

“I thought I’d show my dad around Lincoln instead. He hasn’t been here in a while and there’s some cool stuff now.”

“Cool. You’ll have to show him the skate park.” He faced Wes. “I know it sounds lame but it’s way cool. They serve coffee and sometimes have bands.”

Wes smirked. “Sounds like this place but outside.”

“Right? I know, who needs more coffee? But it’s awesome because the space they’re at used to be a skatepark in the eighties or something and they were able to reuse a lot of stuff that was already there.”

Wes paused and appraised Theo, his eyes flickering in the dim light. He spun his mug on the table so the porcelain rattled against the wood and Charlotte couldn't tell if Theo had said something that annoyed him or if he was intrigued. It was easy to confuse offense and interest with her dad.

"Theo! It looks like she wants you." A petite girl with a bright pink pixie cut gestured Theo over. His body pulled in the direction of the stage he insisted they stay, watch. They might like this one.

"You ever do any of this stuff?" her dad asked once they sat back down. He pointed to a sign for a climate change rally from the year before. The corners were ripped off and someone had drawn a penis on the picture of the earth.

"Sometimes. I went to that one."

"You should tell me more about this. How am I supposed to keep up if you don't talk to me?"

Charlotte tilted her cup from one side to the other and watched the chocolate syrup swerve along the sides. She changed the subject, wanting to talk about the summer and lighter things that interested her. Wes told her to come to Cleveland, it had been a while. Charlotte shrugged and ran her index finger along her cup's edge, licking off the chocolate without responding. She was about to tell him about Carl's disappearance when the same pink-haired girl tapped the microphone and the surrounding chatter hushed. Heads turned toward the stage.

“We have some great performances tonight. And a lot of them, so we should get started.” Charlotte saw Theo crack his neck before placing his foot on the stage. He was halfway to the microphone when the girl introduced him.

Wes leaned against the stone wall, his fingers drumming on the table until he saw Charlotte glare at him and he pulled them back to his phone and the blue glow jumped over his face. As Theo spoke, his lips barely lifted from the microphone’s ridges. Everything stopped, as if someone extracted all the sounds and left Theo’s voice bare. He told a joke, something about stage fright the room knew was untrue about him but laughed anyway. Faces revolved toward him in a smooth wave. He gestured out, palms up, and asked them to visualize a garden. Think of the tulips in front of the Catholic school, or the elaborate arrangements by the new shopping center.

“Bright colors are hard to maintain,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve noticed some have already begun to fade.”

Theo didn’t look at Charlotte during the speech, but her skin buzzed at the mention of flowers. She clutched her hands in her lap and pressed her lips together, scanning the audience for their reactions. Her dad kept switching between Theo and his phone, but she didn’t care about him the way she did everyone else. As Theo begged them to open their eyes, Charlotte wanted proof they were receptive. Theo’s earnestness was a novelty and sweet, but as he neared the ending she decided she didn’t care who was on stage. She needed to see that the audience could listen.

She knew the spot where Theo stood was worn out from other feet, others who planted their three-legged stools as they played guitar or recited poems. She bit the inside of her cheek and imagined Theo gone and her own feet resting in that dent.

Outside Full Moon Charlotte steered her dad around the congregation of smokers. But at the top of the stairs he took his own packet out from his pocket.

“I thought you quit.”

“I know. But travel is stressful.”

Charlotte told herself he looked guilty and shoved her hands in her too-shallow pockets. She walked away, hoping her dad would follow. But he was focused on lighting his cigarette and didn’t notice how far she’d gotten.

“Wait for me!” he pleaded and Charlotte cringed. She felt unsatisfied, jumpy, like she was starving but only had enough food for a snack. They passed a bar whose street-side wall opened like a garage door and groups of twenty- or thirty-somethings spilled out toward the low gate. A woman in tight jeans sat on the gate and nodded to her partner. Charlotte pretended her dad didn’t look at the woman between puffs. Suddenly, his head jerked up.

“What the hell is this?” he pointed at the music pounding in the air. A dance version of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” pulsed overhead. Charlotte crossed her arms, still a few feet away, and hopped from one foot to the other.

I'm so much smarter than them, she wished she could say. I would never do something like that. I know what's sacred. I know what's valuable.

Any other night she would have asked her dad what he thought about Theo, about his coffee, tell him that Full Moon used to be a bank before it served coffee. But she was so tired and dreaded her mom's reaction and her sister's lectures, things she'd forgotten about while hiding in the shop. A younger man responded to her dad's question, laughed, and shook his head. They looked like mimes. Her dad dropped his cigarette on the pavement and patted the man's shoulder. Charlotte turned and ignored how his laugh stood out among the crowd.

Ellie

Ellie shed her cardigan, a dark purple, heavy fabric more appropriate for fall, and draped it over her arm.

"I cannot believe your father. Or your sister." Maggie paced outside St. Wenceslaus' cafeteria windows while Ellie coaxed them back toward the parking lot. A breeze blew past, ripping the remaining iris petals from their stems that lined the sidewalk. Families arriving last minute for the ceremony hurried past and Elle caught a few too many sorry expressions.

"She made it sound like it was her own idea," Andrea said. "I thought it was weird she even wanted to come to this thing. It's not exactly her scene."

Maggie's purse swung from her fingertips and her hesitating steps slowed until she stopped. Andrea kept talking but their mom stared at the ground, lips pursed, until she blamed their father again.

"He always does this. I shouldn't be so surprised."

Ellie shifted her cardigan from one arm to the other, her skin sticky with sweat, and stepped backward. It was tricky pulling her mom back to the car when she spoke in bursts like this and Ellie didn't want them yelling down the sidewalk at each other

“He should have made her call me sooner. Or let me know himself about their plan. He’s an adult.” Andrea agreed and pushed them forward.

When they reached their own car, Maggie fell into the driver’s seat, wrapped her hands around the wheel and twisted the leather. Andrea shoved past Ellie and sat in the back so Ellie would have to face their mom up front. She could hear the soft *click* of Andrea biting her nails.

Maggie fingered the keys in her lap. “Do you know where they are?”

“Downtown. She’s fine, Mom.” Andrea reassured.

Annoyance flared through Ellie and she narrowed her eyes at Andrea in the rearview mirror.

“I thought you were fighting.”

Andrea responded by picking at the undersides of her nails. It all felt familiar: Charlotte’s selfishness, Maggie’s disappointment, Andrea’s peacemaking. Just once Ellie wished the pattern would change. She wasn’t looking for drama but she wished her mom wasn’t so emotional or that Andrea didn’t immediately trying calming everyone down. Maybe letting Charlotte know how mad they were would be a good thing.

They were quiet and Ellie thought about telling her mom that no one had any choices anymore, they just did the best with what they had. Even their dad, who prided himself on his independence and hated Lincoln, still found himself in the city. But

Maggie's red face strained as she turned the keys around in her hand and Ellie knew nothing she said would get through to her.

Andrea pushed her knees against the back of Ellie's seat. "We should go," Ellie said gently. Maggie waited a second longer and rearranged herself. She sat up straight, cleared her throat, and pulled her mouth in a tight, thin line. She turned the key but the car didn't catch. Maggie paused, her expression unchanged, and turned the key again. Muscles strained near her jaw as she tried again and again.

"No. No. No." Maggie ripped the key from the ignition and threw open the door. Ellie glanced at Andrea, who only watched with her arms crossed tightly over her chest, before following. Maggie paced between the rows of cars, walking farther and faster until Ellie felt like she was chasing her. The sun dipped below the school building, its rays shooting out from behind the brick if Ellie looked from certain angles. Maggie stopped near a Land Rover and they plunged under a patch of cool purple shadow.

Their car was a piece of junk, even when they bought it. The brakes always squealed and the steering wheel felt loose. Maggie almost never let them drive it, worried they'd be in danger when the brakes finally went out.

"Mom!"

Maggie silenced Ellie by holding up her index finger, her phone pressed against her ear. Ellie squeezed her fists while her mom stared at the ground until a muffled voice answered and her head shot up. Her voice pitched in a strange, manic pleasantness as she asked for their insurance representative. Ellie cringed and

concentrated on the uneven bursts of cars rushing behind them, like breaths along the road. Her knees stiffened and while she bent one, waiting for the pop, she saw her mom had already hung up.

The lot felt still and claustrophobic while humidity wavered over the cars. No one had walked by in a while, fully engaged in the ceremony by now.

“Ellie,” Maggie’s voice was low but steadied. She gripped her phone. “Could I borrow some money?”

Evening air wavered in front of Ellie, heavy and thick.

“This-this has happened twice already. I only get two free tows per quarter and I-” Maggie cleared her throat. “I thought I’d ask you before I called your dad.”

“Don’t call dad.”

“Well what else do you suggest? You know...you know I hate doing this but I can’t think of anything else right now.”

The school loomed over her mom’s head, the only Catholic school in their conservative town but it looked larger on the outside than Ellie knew it was inside. It appeared sturdy but was falling apart even when she attended. Pipes burst, pieces of the ceiling fell, and classrooms filled so some students sat on the floor instead of in desks. She imagined chunks of the building falling off, piece by piece, like the iris petals, until it blew away. Maybe it was good their dad rarely visited so he didn’t see the way

his tuition payments went toward a school held together by pride instead of bricks and steel.

Ellie's throat burned as she led them back to the car where Andrea sat up alert and wide-eyed in the back seat.

Maggie hovered behind at a distance. "I'll pay you back. I promise."

Ellie rifled through her purse for her wallet. She shook out the contents, embarrassed as gum wrappers and peeling chapsticks scattered over the car. She felt like she moved in slow motion as she opened her wallet and found the debit card. She ran her thumb along the blue plastic before handing it over. Maggie rushed through the rest of the transaction, leaving Andrea and Ellie together but separated by the car's window. Ellie knocked against it.

"Get out."

"What's going on?"

"I bought us a tow truck. And it's hot, how are you still sitting in there?"

Andrea slid out and closed the door so slowly Ellie wasn't sure it locked. She threw the door back open and slammed it shut so the sound echoed through the lot.

"Ellie. Not now..."

"Shut up, Andrea." She spat, regretting her sharpness when she saw her sister's watery expression collapse and panic flooded her eyes. But the thought Andrea might be scared of *her*, upset by *her*, infuriated Ellie. This was not her fault. She was the one

fixing everything. Ellie pressed her palms over her eyes and felt like Charlotte had set a sick wheel of fortune spinning the moment she abandoned them and the arrow had landed on her. Or maybe their dad had whenever he picked the random and spontaneous dates to prove he was in their lives.

“You should let your friends pay for more things,” Ellie insisted when Maggie returned.

Maggie adjusted her navy blouse, the same one she’d worn at work earlier. “I know. But I...I know. You’re right.”

“I hear them offer, Mom, and you don’t take it. I get it, okay? But on top of all that you buy Andrea new sheets and the weird organic food Charlotte wants, but don’t take care of the things that actually matter. Like the car or the lights.”

Andrea inhaled sharply. “Ellie, I think-“

“Charlotte buys her own special foods,” Maggie fought back. “She knows I won’t.”

“Well then what were those new shoes I saw in our closet? The brown sandals?” She needed to stop. Thoughts arrived half-formed and disappeared quickly but she hated being inactive. She knew her mom moved through days by gripping one hour after another and that frightened Ellie because she knew she did the same thing. She glared at her mom, who wouldn’t look at her. Maggie’s silver earrings flashed unevenly

in the dim light, smudged and dirty. Her eyes sunk back, like her whole body folded into itself. Ellie's lips curled.

Maggie's hands fell so her palms slapped against her skirt. "I don't know anything about those shoes but I said I'm sorry. I will pay you back."

"This happens all the time, Mom. All. The. Time. Why?"

"Don't yell at me."

"All I'm saying is that there are steps you can take to fix this instead of having to rely on your daughter. Maybe I have my own plans."

"Like what...dear?" Maggie straightened. "Tell me your plan. Because you can not lecture me about being prepared and responsible while you've apparently decided to let everyone else take care of you. And I'm tired, okay?" Her voice splintered. Ellie felt Andrea's hand on her elbow and rage sparked in her chest. She was tired too. She had held her family in her hands for so long, keeping them together, and now she realized how much it was like holding a block of ice. Its edges had melted and leaked through her fingers. There was nothing she could do as the cold stung her body.

The ride in the tow truck was silent except for the driver's stilted comments about traffic. He had a particular anger toward the number of potholes and complained each time the truck rattled over another one in the narrow streets. Maggie nodded

politely while Ellie pressed her forehead against the cool window. The air conditioning roared.

When he dropped them off Andrea snuck inside while Ellie stayed back and signed for the payment. The driver listed off what they were supposed to do next.

“You gotta take that in,” he patted the hood of their car. “Can’t let it sit around. My wife let her car sit around for too long and before she knew it I had some destroyed brake pads on my hands. Not to mention the oil needed changing. They’re small things but they’re important.”

“I am aware,” Ellie gritted her teeth. She shoved the clipboard back at him and left her mom.

“Wow, thanks for all your help,” Maggie tossed the debit card on the kitchen table. “You forgot that.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Ellie, listen to me. If you want to live here that’s fine but you need to be willing to help out every now and then.”

“I do help out, Mom. I’ve helped out my entire life.” She almost laughed. “And I feel pathetic living here, I don’t want to be. That money was part of my savings to get the hell out.”

Maggie gripped the back of a chair. “You drive that car too. You could have done something about it at any time. But you and other two just wait for things to break and

then I'm the one who has to deal with them." She piled up the bills, loose papers, and coupons cluttered over the table until they sloped over in an avalanche. Ellie froze. Her body ached and she knew if she left, she'd be admitting she was at fault. The more Maggie moved the louder her movements became. Papers fluttered and chairs banged against the table before she turned and began fixing a twisted strip in the blinds. The plastic shivered.

"Leave it. Call maintenance tomorrow. That's what they're for."

"No. Don't," Maggie didn't let go. "I can do this. It's fine."

"Stop. You're--"

Maggie pulled and the left side of the rod ripped from the wall. The blinds crashed down in rippling chaos until they hung diagonally across the window. Ellie and her mom stood shocked, looking through the bare window at the dark neighborhood. Across the small patch of grass Ellie had a clear view of their neighbor's kitchen where a woman was washing dishes. She didn't look up from her sink, absorbed and protected by her own world. Ellie wished she knew the woman's name.

Maggie sank into a chair, twisting the broken piece of plastic around her finger before letting it fall. Ellie sat beside her and looked at her own hands, the tops of her knuckles white and flakey.

"I can take care of it if you want. I'll call in the morning."

“No. Please. If you do then they’ll know you live here and you’re...you’re not supposed to. You’re over eighteen and housing authority says you technically have to pay rent.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

“They don’t know that I’m over eighteen.” But Ellie wasn’t confident.

“Ellie, I love you. I want to give you a place to stay. But I can’t call maintenance or ask for help or get in any kind of trouble because they’ll send someone here and they’ll see you and Andrea, who shouldn’t live here either.” She spread her hands over the table. “They’ll ask you to leave. Or I’ll have to pay higher rent which I can’t afford and I’ll have to move too.”

“But maybe you should move. It might be good for you.”

Maggie pulled her hands through her auburn hair, frizzy from the humidity and clinging to her face. “Where am I supposed to go? How do I move? No one would approve my application and even if they do, I can’t afford moving expenses.”

They sat beside each other and Ellie longed to extend her hands toward her mother but she held her curled fists on her knees instead. They stayed that way, their muted reflections in the exposed glass, until Maggie rubbed her eyes and stood. She muttered a goodnight and brushed past Ellie. Time went by and Ellie found herself counting the clock’s ticks in threes, comforted that the clock kept working and that she could hear each second clearly.

Ellie was still awake and reading one of Andrea's books about snakes she'd found when Charlotte crept in a little before midnight.

"You're up," Charlotte froze. Moonlight from the kitchen streaked over her bare head in an elongated triangle.

Ellie lowered the book. "So are you."

"Are the others asleep?"

"They both went upstairs a while ago. Mom's upset."

"I'm sorry. I had a--"

Ellie snorted. "Wow. Thanks for the apology."

Charlotte gaped a moment before scowling and taking an awkward step over a pair of shoes scattered in her path. "You know dad hates that school crap."

"You should have told us sooner. What you did to Mom wasn't okay."

Charlotte's face twisted into something Ellie couldn't read. The exposure from the broken blinds cast the room in a blurry, grey light and Charlotte's shadow stretched long and thin over the carpet. Charlotte looked at the damage but didn't say anything. Her eyes were colorless.

"You know what I had to deal with? Again?" Ellie knew she should leave it alone for now but speaking felt good, like she was draining the thoughts from her brain. "You

leave and come back whenever you want but it's always someone else who has to fix what you screwed up."

"I was just trying to have a nice time with Dad."

"Whatever."

"I was! And I texted you!"

"Yeah, after we were already at St. Wenc." Ellie couldn't imagine what Charlotte and their dad had done that could have been so much fun. The idea that Charlotte had fun at all angered Ellie and she closed the book, daring her sister to admit she'd done something wrong. But Charlotte seemed solid, unflinching in their living room. Her shoulders squared off and she held her arms at her side, unable to hold back the frustration in her gaze.

"So what?" Charlotte sneered. "You fucked up but you still get to yell at me?"

"Excuse me?"

"You don't get to come back here and yell at me. Mom can, fine. But you..."

Charlotte opened and closed her mouth. "You don't get to tell me what to do. I don't know where you ever got the idea you could in the first place since you're the last person who should be giving any kind of advice." Charlotte stalked off, leaving Ellie huddled on the couch

Andrea

Andrea leaned over the edge of her bed so she could hear her sisters' voices through the air vent. She was exhausted. Worried her mom would hunt for the shoes once they returned home she had run upstairs and stashed them under her laundry pile. But she couldn't stand being uninformed. She pushed further and thought about switching to the floor when she heard someone run up the stairs.

Charlotte's silhouette rushed through the dark room. She crashed through the room, banging dresser drawers and muttering something under her breath as she changed out of her award's ceremony outfit. It was good Andrea was awake because Charlotte's noise would have woken her up anyway.

"You okay?" Andrea asked.

Charlotte froze but Andrea couldn't see her face. "Ellie's being a bitch. What else is new?"

"I think she's feeling overwhelmed. You know, with living here and mom and-"

"I just wanted to be nice to dad for *once*. You guys never are."

Andrea sat all the way up and stretched her legs out. The clock beside her bed flashed twelve-fifteen and her stomach rumbled. Now she'd have to decide if she could sleep through the hunger or if she could find those chips and salsa in the cupboard.

“I know. We’re not.”

Charlotte pulled a t-shirt over her head and crawled into her own bed. “And Mom doesn’t get how stupid those awards are. They don’t mean anything except that you’re good at high school.”

“Mom’s just proud of you.”

“Can’t she be proud of something else? Something I’m proud of too?”

Andrea didn’t know how to respond. The answer seemed like it should be easy, but guessing felt risky. Everyone was already upset and the wrong thing could set Charlotte off again. But she also didn’t know the answer because she didn’t know Charlotte that well anymore. She’d grown tired being so angry since the incident with Carl, but Andrea still felt uneasy around her sister.

Charlotte must have read Andrea’s silence for tiredness and sighed. Her head dropped on her chest, waiting a second longer before whispering goodnight. Even once Andrea could hear Charlotte’s light snores, she stared at the ceiling and listened to the house pop and expand in the humidity. She always thought she was good at helping others, but the swirling cloud of amorphous need settled over the house made her panic. The room’s darkness looked like it moved, wrapping around her and making her uncomfortably warm.

When her clock read two-thirty she rolled off her mattress, pulled on a pair of exercise shorts, and padded downstairs. The railing creaked under her grip. When she

reached the bottom she could see Ellie's body curled on the couch, her feet sticking out from the edge of a throw blanket. The ugly knit fabric had fringe along the edge that was too long and even in the dim moonlight the early colors looked cheap, like a fake plant. It was a college graduation present from a friend of their dad's, someone they had never met, and had Ellie's full name stitched in dark green.

Andrea twisted the edge of her t-shirt and felt herself drifting in and out of attention, jolted by the hunger rolling through her. She followed the soft bluish light from the blanket to the exposed kitchen window.

The broken rod almost looked artistic, a design choice. But when Andrea approached it she saw how crumpled the fallen blinds were and the scattered bits of drywall around the carpet's edge. Andrea had heard a crash in between Ellie and her mom's fighting, but it had only been one more thing in the entire night's mess that she didn't consider it could be something unusual. Ellie had been known to break things in the past too, so for a moment Andrea had a sick hope the crash was Ellie doing something normal.

Fear picked at Andrea. How many people had looked inside their house? Was there a nail lost in the carpet? Why had both her mom and Ellie left it like this?

She went back upstairs and found an old extra-long twin sheet from Ellie's college dorm. When Andrea returned, Ellie was still on the couch but had turned away so the streetlight didn't touch her face. Andrea pinned the sheet to the wall so it covered the window, careful not to step on the blinds and ruin them more. When she

finished she didn't admire her work, already embarrassed that someone would misinterpret the move or worse, see it as childish. It looked like a makeshift stage curtain.

The next morning Andrea opened her eyes and saw Charlotte sitting cross-legged on her bed, dragging a pen slowly over a spiral notebook. The way she pressed her head against the window and let her wrist make wide, looping circles made Andrea think she had writer's block. She looked up when her hand fell off the page and onto a pillow at her side.

Charlotte frowned. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Like, two seconds."

"It's about time you woke up. It's almost--"

Andrea pulled the sheet over her head and groaned. Charlotte stopped talking but Andrea felt her stare from across the room. Andrea did not want to start her day feeling like someone was watching her and willed Charlotte to leave. Instead, Andrea heard her shuffle closer until her shadow darkened the bedsheet.

"Hey," Charlotte coughed. "Joy's picking me up soon because apparently mom's car broke? We're going to Full Moon before I have to go to work. Do you want to come? I'll pay."

Andrea snorted. Charlotte had missed a lot.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“I’m always mad at you.” She uncovered her face and saw Charlotte loom over her. Sunlight glowed around her head. “Where’s Ellie?”

“Mom took her to Theresa’s.”

All at once Andrea’s mind filled with the events from the night before. Last night Charlotte had been angry, impatient to the point of explosion. But now she looked nervous, her eyes avoided Andrea’s and from where Andrea looked up, she seemed to sway. As Andrea heard their neighborhood moving with the easy slowness of summer afternoons, carrying on her anger felt difficult. She was always mad at Charlotte in some way, but adding more made her chest hurt and she wanted to forget the whole thing happened now.

If she didn’t go with Charlotte, she’d be trapped inside all day and it would already be terrible once everyone got home and were stuck with her. She pushed herself up and leaned over her knees, dreading the next few days where they’d spend every second dancing around each other and lacing their words with blame and apologies. The house already felt heavy. So she muttered that she’d be ready in thirty minutes.

At Full Moon an hour later, Andrea watched Charlotte pick at her sandwich while Joy was at the counter buying another cookie.

“Does mom hate me?” Charlotte asked.

“No...she’s a little upset but she’ll get over it.”

Andrea pushed around a piece of fruit on her plate for a second before setting her fork down and crossing her arms. She never understood what Charlotte found so appealing about Full Moon with its concrete walls and dim lighting. It was cold too, and even though it was a small relief from the heat, she felt uncomfortable as sweat cooled on her body.

Charlotte tapped the edge of her plate and said something Andrea couldn’t hear.

“What?”

“It’s hard to split between mom and dad.”

“I know.”

“Ellie doesn’t get it.”

Joy returned. Her chair wobbled when she sat, the uneven legs rattling on the floor. Andrea sipped her iced coffee. She sort of agreed with Charlotte, but if there was one thing she had taken away from the Claire and Lydia thing, it was that reality looked different for everyone. Being the middle child meant she felt like she measured realities and decided how much weight to give each one.

Joy brushed crumbs off the front of her black sundress. It was cute but Andrea didn’t believe her mom, the music teacher at one of the Catholic elementary schools, would let her wear something so short.

“Andrea, did Charlotte tell you about the ceremony last night? We were texting about it. The caterer ran out of food before everyone got there and people were pissed.” She giggled behind her hand.

“They catered it?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Sort of. A senior’s parents own La Beauté - that French place?”

“Oh.”

Joy shook her head, her brown ponytail whipping from shoulder to shoulder. “Anyway, it was practically a mob scene at the end because people ran out so fast. It was probably good you didn’t go.”

Charlotte looked over Andrea’s shoulder. “The back’s open.”

“Does he do anything else? Like have a real job?”

“Who?” Andrea asked.

“You don’t have a job.”

“Yes I do. I help my dad at the office all the time.” Joy huffed. “Summer’s busy at the Catholic Center. Lots of marriage prep.”

Andrea raised her eyebrows. “What’s the big deal?”

“Theo uses the back room for rehearsals and stuff. He was texting me the other day saying he had some new ideas for the summer. He wants to make the room nicer too.” Charlotte gathered their plates. “You should see it, Andrea. It’s cool.”

“Does it look like a basement too?” No one responded and Andrea followed the other two. They walked along the coffee bar and through the open door with signs pointing toward the bathrooms. In the hallway the walls were bare and the space was so narrow that sounds from the shop behind them vanished. Andrea placed her hand on the cold wall, feeling like they were being sucked down a pipe.

The back room wasn’t well lit but someone had tried with flimsy plastic lamps in three of the long room’s corners. Twinkle lights like the ones up front hung along the edges, but ended halfway around since there weren’t enough. There were two card tables and a beat-up couch off center. A lanky boy by one of the tables directed a few others and held a large stack of multicolored paper. Andrea assumed the boy was Theo, but couldn’t remember if she had met him before. She pieced together story fragments and comments from Charlotte in her mind.

“Is this the flyer?” Charlotte picked up a neon green sheet and scanned it.

Andrea exchanged a look with Joy. “What flyer?”

Theo cut Charlotte off. “The Governor wants money to wipe out all these local businesses and make room for luxury student apartments. So we’re having a protest.” Andrea picked up one which showed the word *Haywood Project* in huge, blocky letters. Scheduled for Fourth of July weekend.

“Can you believe that?” Theo scoffed. “He’s having a huge party to announce his plans for destroying people’s livelihoods. Probably with our taxes.”

“Do you pay taxes?”

Joy crossed her arms and had a glazed expression while Theo talked. Charlotte appeared absorbed by Theo’s activity, which surprised Andrea seeing as Theo’s earnestness was not something Charlotte usually went for. There was also something so sugary about Theo’s words, like he was convincing himself in the process too.

The boy across the table asked Theo a question and tucked the neon paper into one of those free newsletters Andrea saw around town in the wire racks. Ink covered the boy’s fingers and his cut off shirt revealed large, tanned arms. He smiled when he caught Andrea looking at him.

“Where did you get all these?” Joy flicked through one of the papers.

“I had a few friends grab them. We’ll put them back once they’re stuffed.”

“You stole these?”

“Borrowed.” Theo’s eyes twitched. “They’ll be back tonight.”

Charlotte tucked her flyer into an empty newspaper. “There’s a Middle Eastern grocery store there. And a park. And a used bike shop.”

“Traffic is going to stuck when this gets started,” Andrea joked.

“That won’t happen.”

“Why are you using flyers? Isn’t that kind of wasteful?” The door dividing the back room and the shop slammed and the group stopped, watching the hallway until they were sure whoever it was just went to the bathroom. Andrea didn’t know why they’d stopped and held still only because Charlotte’s face hardened.

“A little. How else would we do it?” Theo absently rolled one in a tube.

“A Facebook event?”

“No one uses Facebook. And people who do use it are so...noncommittal. There’s no urgency.”

Andrea dropped her arms and tried catching Charlotte’s gaze, but her sister turned away instead, blocking Andrea’s view of the table. Joy hovered near Charlotte’s arm and Andrea broke off while the group negotiated the plans for the protest. She wandered toward the bookcases. The room had a grimy feeling, walking the line between survival and actually enjoying that survival. She sort of admired it for its insistence on existing but she couldn’t shake the feeling like it’d all been pulled together last minute and she wondered what was the rush? She found an old John Grisham novel and a few out of date textbooks on the shelves, picking up a paperback sociology text. A girl’s name was written on the first page in pencil.

Andrea sat on the sagging couch and pushed aside some homemade zines on the coffee table. The couch’s fabric scratched her bare legs and glancing at her phone she saw Charlotte had to be at work soon. When she looked at the group she saw their heads bent toward the middle and formed a tight, impenetrable wall.

Despite how late she slept, Andrea felt very tired. She held one of the zines and turned it over in her hand, weighing the stiff cardstock and ran her finger over the thick dark lines. The characters had large eyes and fat stomachs with perfectly rounded mouths. The paper was dusty purple with a marijuana plant stretched across the cover page. The title “Architecture Craze” was stamped at the top, but Andrea didn’t understand it or the message the characters spit out in their large, urgent letters.

She set it aside on the couch and stood, telling the others they needed to go.

Charlotte

Charlotte heard Andrea's voice but it echoed behind her in the distance. The leaflets and Theo's animated gestures distracted her. She understood why people liked him but since her dad visited Full Moon she felt like she was seeing him through someone else's eyes. His enthusiasm looked more like desperation and his ideas seemed naïve. A protest was too simple and she felt insulted by his laziness. Even the paper she held was recycled from an old Full Moon party.

This wouldn't work. Travis' protest had been weak, scattered, and ultimately overshadowed by what she and Theo had done to the flowers. Even though those images of the Governor's garden faded from print in twenty-four hours, she considered it a change in the right direction. *The Haywood Project* the leaflets read, but the word "project" felt like a euphemism. The stakes were higher, people's lives and businesses and their space were being gutted. Their response had to match the crime.

She pushed the leaflets over and looked at Theo.

"What if this turns out like Travis' protest?"

"It won't."

"Because..."

"Charlotte," Joy muttered. "Let it go."

Theo took Charlotte's arm and pulled her away from the table. He bent over so their eye levels were even but it made Charlotte feel shorter and annoyance strained over her face.

"Frankly," Theo said, "because I'm better at this than Travis is. People will come."

"Well aren't you confident."

"I'm just saying. I can usually get a good turnout." He smiled. "Especially if you help me. We make a good team."

"But what if we tried something different? Like the flowers. That worked."

The space where Andrea had been sitting on the couch was empty. Charlotte felt relief knowing she was probably in the main shop and couldn't hear their conversation or see them leaning toward each other. She pulled back, self-conscious, which Theo must have interpreted as resignation because he patted her shoulder and nodded.

"Maybe another time. We can't do that too much or else no one will take it seriously. Either everyone will start doing it or the people who matter will ignore it."

Theo unfolded his body and left Charlotte. Charlotte could hear him explaining something about letting the top part of the flyer poke out of the top, but she felt displaced. She watched the small group continue their project for a little longer before noticing a small, shiny box on the coffee table. Joy frowned in the doorway but Charlotte ignored her, following the tiny flash until she saw it was Theo's Zippo lighter.

He bought it as a joke but she knew he enjoyed the mechanical *snap* the cap made as the flame vanished. Charlotte cradled the lighter in her hand, smoothing her thumb over the print of the lion on the front, before sliding it in her pocket.

“He’s annoying,” Joy whispered once they were far enough away. “And he always looks like he needs a new shirt. His collar was all floppy around his neck.”

Charlotte opened her mouth to defend him but it sounded pathetic in her head. That wasn’t what she was for: Theo’s reputation guard. He had enough of those already. Joy stopped them in the doorframe.

“And what’s that you were saying about flowers?”

“Nothing. It was...” Charlotte ran her hand down the splintered wood that arched over them. Porcelain clattered as the espresso machine whirled and her thoughts struggled, half-formed. If Joy hadn’t seen the article, Charlotte felt like she needed context.

“We...at Travis’ protest over the death penalty we used flowers as this, like, illustration for the kind of destruction Murray was causing.”

“Okay. How?”

Charlotte searched for Andrea over Joy’s shoulder. “I don’t know, we had some that were sort of brown and dying and we put them near his mansion.”

Joy’s face scrunched together, the twinkle lights speckling her sunburned cheeks. “That’s creepy, Charlotte.”

“Sometimes creepy works.”

“Was it your idea?”

“It was a group effort.” Charlotte’s phone vibrated and when she pulled it from her pocket she saw four missed calls. She was halfway through the second voicemail when she found Andrea reading the bulletin board at the front.

“You ready?” she asked.

Charlotte shook her head. Hot air blew in from outside as more people entered. Their voices drowned out her boss’ on the phone, but Charlotte didn’t need to hear more to know the fast food place had closed.

“I don’t think I work there anymore.”

Andrea and Joy stared at her, registering the words. Even after saying the out loud Charlotte didn’t know if they were real.

“Did he fire you? Just now, over the phone?” Andrea asked.

“He just says they’re closing indefinitely. He didn’t give any details just that I shouldn’t expect to see an unlocked door if I go out there.”

Joy twisted her hands. “I’m so sorry, Charlotte.”

Charlotte expected tears or panic but instead she felt like waiting for the punchline. She wondered if she listened to all four messages that she’d uncover a riddle

or be let in on the joke. She ran her hand over her head, the short fuzz soft and comforting, and avoided the pitying looks from the other two.

She looked over Andrea's shoulder and up the stairs leading out toward the street. A stroller's bulky wheels rolled by, followed by a woman's slim tennis shoes. Her boss' voice had been rushed and annoyed. Andrea asked what Charlotte wanted next, but she could only see the rest of June and July and August stretched out in front of her. Everything sunk back in the heat and monotony of summer.

Later that night Charlotte tagged along with Joy at the campus library. It was the only place opened past eight and Joy's mom needed nametags printed.

Charlotte jumped at a hollow *boom* behind her but saw it was only the librarian tucking in chairs. "Don't you have a fancy printer at home?"

"We did, but it wasn't technically ours, it belongs to my dad's office at the Catholic Center. It broke but they haven't given us a new one yet." She fed the machine another blank sheet. "The Walmart ones always jam for big projects like this and my mom gets all stressed."

They were silent except for the sandy swish of the papers. The sound hypnotized Charlotte and she enjoyed the brief calmness in her head, exhausted by the worry swirling through her since she'd lost her job. No more paycheck definitely freaked her

out, but she was more concerned about what the free time would do. She wasn't sure how to fill it and the blank space suffocated her.

"It is a little spooky here, though." Joy said.

"Theo says the Catholic Center spends money in all the wrong places."

Joy hummed.

"What? He's on your side. He'd say your dad deserves the tools he needs for his ministry."

"Theo's religious?"

"Well, no. But--"

Joy rolled her eyes. "See, that's why I don't like Theo. He's confident in a way that I don't think he deserves to be. Like, who put him in charge?" She counted the freshly-printed nametags her mom needed for some silent auction at St. Michael's. Since Charlotte met Joy in third grade, she had no idea how Joy's mom managed everything- her job, events with her husband, their house- and all with five kids. Joy always said her mom had had five kids so she could do all her activities, and she often called herself and her brothers Rhonda's Assembly Line.

While Joy groaned at one of the mistakes, Charlotte looked around at the deserted building. Leftover anxiety from finals week still hovered in the air. The librarian stapled something at the round desk in the room's center, the sound echoing through the cavernous space.

Charlotte sat on the table beside the printer. "I feel like Theo has good intentions though. Like, his heart is in the right place but he gets sort of blind. Like, only his ideas are the good ones."

"And they're not even that good."

"They're just...generic."

Joy tucked the finished nametags in her backpack. Looking at Charlotte she pulled a brown curl over her eye, going cross-eyed before it sprung back. "Are you sure you don't *like* him."

"Ugh. No."

"You talk about him a lot."

"Well I don't. So drop it."

"Stop doing things for him! The only difference between him and the boys at St. Wenc is that he's allowed to grow facial hair."

Theo isn't satisfied, Charlotte thought, but explaining that to someone like Joy was difficult, who wasn't just content with her position but pleased with it. At school Charlotte and Joy both agreed that the portraits of the martyred saints had gotten strange, but Joy always ended up saying something along the lines of how pretty a painting was or how brave they had been. She apologized or justified when Charlotte wanted to tell her that a dead girl wasn't beautiful, she was just dead.

But it wasn't just at school, it was the way her mom sighed as she held open the door for Ellie after Ellie admitted she hadn't applied to any law schools. Or the way Andrea hid from their dad because she thought his wrath was inevitable. No one changed anything even if they were uncomfortable. They resigned themselves to their dissatisfaction as if that was the ending.

Charlotte didn't think Theo was smart, but he moved forward while everyone else stayed put.

Joy broke Charlotte's concentration. "Hey, do you need help with something?" she pulled her backpack straps tighter around her shoulders. "Because if you want something done and need help, like, without Theo, I can maybe--"

"No. It's okay. Really." Charlotte softened. "I just don't have a job now and I'm trapped inside my own head all the time."

"You can talk to me."

"I know," Charlotte searched for a change in subject. "This place is huge."

Joy's eyes widened and her curls bounced around her face. "Do you know about the stacks? They're these cool rooms in between the floors that hold extra books and stuff. My brothers used them all the time when they went here."

"For what?"

“Who knows? I always heard them talking about *the stacks* and how they were great hiding places.” She led them out of the printing room. As they reached the base of the stairs, Charlotte collided with Joy’s shoulder.

“Oh my god. That’s where they’d take girls.”

Charlotte’s laughter bounced through the stairwell. “Well Thomas is cute.”

“Stop! Stop! I promise I’ll never ask about Theo again.” Joy gave an exaggerated shiver.

They reached floor four-and-a-half and stood outside a door half the size of a normal one. Joy grunted and pushed hard against it. The space was only a few feet wider than Charlotte’s bedroom, but the shelves and shelves of books made the room feel even smaller. They both crouched under the doorway but Charlotte could stand almost straight once inside while Joy sat to be comfortable. The books loomed and made the room feel like it was collapsing in on itself. Charlotte breathed through her mouth and stifled the nervous flutter in her stomach.

Titles glittered in gold font on the books’ spines. Dissertations, Charlotte noted as she pulled one and flipped through the dusty pages. *1967* was embossed on the cover and intimidating black lines ran through the pages. Charlotte wondered who still read these things. Who need information from 1967 about the formation and transfer of clay?

“All of these are about farms,” Charlotte said when she found one about beet production.

A bookcase swayed as Joy leaned against and panic shot up Charlotte’s back. It didn’t fall but she stared at the metal sides convinced it kept moving even after Joy giggled and disappeared down another aisle. The place felt isolated, too quiet, and it was weird holding something so old while looking untouched.

“What about this one?” Joy brought over a thicker book titled *Farmhouse Durability*. Charlotte stood by her friend’s arm and watched the contents flicker between her fingers. The book contained the same black font but each chapter ended with an elaborate farmhouse illustration. Chapter five was about tornado shelters. Chapter twelve was about insulation and blizzard safety. The designs were precise and clean, like the artist finished seconds before putting it in Joy’s hands. It reminded Charlotte of ghosts.

“I wish my mom’s house looked like this.” Charlotte touched a staircase in the middle of a two-story house. The banister looked thick and heavy, and more detailed than any of the other drawings. She thought about her mom’s stairs, how they didn’t have a banister but a railing that rattled whenever someone used it. Her mom’s house could snap like a twig, but these, Charlotte felt misty, these could stand up against anything.

Joy sighed. “That’d be cool. They don’t make houses like this anymore.”

“My mom’s place is one of those cheap public housing things. I don’t think anyone wants to give people like us houses like this.”

“Andrew, the engineer, told me once that now houses are built with these efficient, synthetic materials that make building them easier and faster. But they can also create new shapes and stuff. He’s all excited about them because he thinks he can be more creative now.” She closed the book and took it back.

Charlotte walked slowly past the shelves toward the one window on the opposite wall. She leaned on the small ledge and looked across the street, lined with a Wendy’s, a shoe store, and the ancient theater building.

“That one’s haunted, right?” Charlotte pointed at the theater.

“Ivy Theater? There’s a couple of ghosts I think. They’re all nice though. The worst they do is throw stuff around. But I’ve heard they help with cleaning up after plays.”

The Ivy was a tall, Victorian-style house that caught the streetlight in its curves. From the distance it looked fragile and thing: a straining skeleton. Charlotte wondered how closely it aligned with the books behind her and how much it had gone through without collapsing. It was like the fragility must be a disguise, a strategy for survival.

A bay window made of three tall panes of glass protruded from the building’s side. Charlotte pressed her forehead against the library’s winow and admired the way it looked suspended above the grass.

Ellie

Ellie was shocked the morning she arrived at Theresa's and saw *June* displayed on the calendar. Even more embarrassing was it had been June for a week and Ellie had never noticed. By now, she ended each week exhausted and the days felt like a constant wheel in motion. She tracked Jane up and down the halls, analyzed her cries, and stretched the limits of her own creativity. Occupying a baby for ten hours a day was harder than she'd thought.

Theresa moved in and out of the house with so much irregularity that Ellie threw out her established schedule and forced herself to take things in stride. Theresa owned a local stationary store and when it wasn't Jane, it was The Printers or shipments or Yelp reviews. Ellie had seen Theresa's store, Sunshine Gifts, once when she first started nannying. The store felt like walking into a ball of cotton candy. It was pretty, but all the products were just so...cute. Fluffy, curvy clouds wished Get Well Soon. Perky flowers covered the planners, and glitter-rimmed plastic champagne flutes stacked the shelves. Theresa loved it though, and said it was her outlet for the girliness Charlie wouldn't allow in their house.

Ellie found her daily instructions on a yellow legal pad, covered in corrections and blacked-out words, an illustration of Theresa's erratic thought process. Ellie wished

she could spend mornings thinking about the day's goals and structure, but Jane dictated everything with little room for compromise. Ellie considered it a miracle she left the house on Fridays with Jane in one piece.

On Thursday morning Ellie read the latest note detailing Theresa's concern that Jane might be lactose intolerant. She'd made a very long list of forbidden foods and Ellie set it down before finishing it. Jane's babbling floated from down the hall.

Jane didn't scream so much anymore and laid her head on Ellie's shoulder. It was obvious Theresa rushed to find a space for her daughter in an already crowded life. In the corner of Jane's room sat a dated, light brown desk with attached shelves that curved over the wall. It held a bulky desktop computer and a printer near Jane's crib. Theresa had brightened the room with pictures and pastel fabrics, but Ellie always felt there were two opposing stories happening at the same time.

Rain streaked over the bedroom window and for once the house felt still. The storms meant there'd be no construction for the day and Theresa's note said she'd be in meetings most of the day. Ellie cradled Jane and paced in out and out of the rooms, taking a closer look at the house. It felt isolated and muted, and Ellie reveled in the way her bare feet sunk into the plush carpet.

"You're in a good mood today, aren't you?" Ellie patted Jane's back. "Are we done teething for a while? It'd be nice if someone gave me a break."

In the living room, Ellie laid out a blanket and settled Jane on top. Jane's brown eyes darkened. Or maybe it was the way the house looked shadowed by the rain. When

she'd started the job Ellie thought Jane's eyes were gold-tinted, the color pulling out along the edges and made her dreamy-looking. As Ellie watched her play it wasn't like her gaze had flattened but here was an evenness behind her now that struck Ellie as too adult, too aware for her age.

Ellie gave Jane a mirror to play with, amused that the child had recently discovered her own reflection and made them stop by reflective surfaces so she could see the way her face changed in each one. Theresa discouraged too much of the activity for fear Jane would become vain and self-centered, but Ellie only sat back on her hands and watched Jane bring the mirror close enough that her breath fogged the glass. The curve of a black clock reflected on the side.

"Your house is so weird, Janie." Ellie fell back and folded her hands over her stomach, watching the black clocks silver lines spin over her. "Mine's just a mess. I bet your mom threw out your sisters' third grade social studies binders, but not mine." Distant thunder rolled on the other side of the window and Ellie felt sleep creep along the edges of her eyes.

"Stay there." She commanded as she pushed herself off the floor and left Jane with her own reflection. The house felt held in place by the rain's steady patter and Ellie seized the frozen moment, wanting to know what was different about Theresa's house from her own. Their kitchen window was still covered by a bedsheet and that made everything feel more out of control. She dragged her hand along the walls and wondered what was the thread that held everything in place at Theresa's.

She stepped inside the guest room, harmless and dressed in cool tones. The walls were lavender and the off-white furniture set could fit two people. Ellie opened the drawers on the end tables and found each contained a Bible. Thunder, closer this time, vibrated over the walls while the rain's shadows braided together on the rug. Ellie picked up one of the three Kennedy biographies by the window and studied Jackie's wide, black-and-white smile.

Jane's birth must have interrupted Theresa's attempts at ushering in the next stage of her life. Any youthfulness in the house felt dated, not vintage or retro, but a relic of the twins' childhoods. Ellie flipped the book, hiding Jackie's face, and pulled the closet door over the tracks. Jane's disembodied bursts of laughter mixed with alarm assured Ellie she was fine alone. The closet was empty except for a tangle of fishing poles and old hangers lined with flaky blue foam. All at once the clouds parted and confusing sunlight washed the bedroom while the rain's speed increased. Jane screamed.

When Ellie hurried back, she found Jane tugging at her thin sweater, her head bowed over her chest and pulling the damp fabric away from her skin.

"What's wrong?" Jane looked up and revealed a large wet spot running over her stomach. Her small face dropped and she whimpered. Ellie knew Theresa preferred Ellie change Jane into something new, but it was so much easier to let her roam around shirtless for a while. After Ellie undressed her, she noticed the air conditioning mingled

with the humidity created an uncomfortable chill. Jane patted her stomach, unconcerned for the time being.

“Can you show me your house? An exclusive tour?” Jane wobbled behind Ellie, who wasn’t sure what exactly she was looking for. But she found herself categorizing each object, every cereal, the photo arrangements. Theresa had six different kinds of ice cream in the fridge and the basement was designed like an afterthought compared to the living room. Wood magazine racks held *Good Housekeeping* and *Sports Illustrated* while woven baskets hid toilet paper. Everything matched something else in the house-purchased in sets. By the time Ellie reached the master bedroom she was convinced Theresa wasn’t well organized, it was simply boring.

Jane slipped past Ellie’s leg and went straight for the pile of throw pillows in the corner, screaming when Ellie came near. Pillows flopped over and the satiny fabric creased under the child’s weight. Ellie hoped they weren’t arranged in a certain way.

The bedroom felt different from the rest of the house. It was smaller than most master bedrooms, but still had its own bathroom and a walk-in closet on the left. The bed was made with a comforter so dark that when the limited, waxy light angled through the clouds, Ellie saw it was green not black. A handcrafted rocking chair held a pile of messy, coordinating throw blankets and a few shirts Ellie suspected Theresa rejected earlier that morning. Ellie pulled open the drawer of one of the matching end tables and found an empty, worn out wallet, and a breviary.

Jane ran and yanked the bed's cover until she lost her balance and fell. She blinked but decided she was fine before pushing her butt into the air.

The mess surprised Ellie because it looked exclusively Theresa's. Charlie's stuff was nonexistent or tucked away, and if it weren't for the photo of them by the window, Ellie wouldn't know he lived there. But the room felt soft and reminded her of the way fog made the earth velvety. She smoothed her hand over the comforter and the fabric rustled like leaves. She had expected herself to be jealous but she felt hypnotized instead. Theresa's clutter looked like collections instead of chaos. The more she had, the more it hid from sight.

On top of the largest dresser sat a thick watch. Its face was smudged and when Ellie flipped it over the words *Year Twenty. We can do anything.* were engraved. The arms didn't move and when she held it close to her ear, it remained silent.

She skipped the narrow top drawer and moved her fingers down the smooth, cherry red wood before pulling open the second. She met resistance until the right side fell off the track and the parts scraped against each other. Jane leaned against her leg.

"Don't tell your mom, okay?"

Jane's unmoved expression stared up until Ellie placed her hand on the baby's head and smoothed her hair. Jane shook her off and sat on the carpet. Ellie hadn't realized her shoulders were tense until she rolled her neck and opened the drawer.

It was a sock drawer, each pair folded toe-to-ankle and close together like a loud, patterned quilt. Theresa clearly preferred blue but a pair with sparkling gold stripes sat in the top right corner. Threads sprouted from a few toes while others rolled through each other in kaleidoscopic cycles. They reminded Ellie of her old boss' Serenity's earrings and each unique bobble that got knotted in her curls.

Ellie picked up a black pair, kneading the fabric between her fingers. She pulled back a blue pair with white stars, a light green, then a violet argyle, underneath which lay the smooth black curve of Theresa's gun.

Jane thumped her small fist against Ellie's leg and whined. Her brown eyes widened as she searched for attention but Ellie didn't move. The edges of herself burred with the room and she clutched the socks in her hand. Jane's cries shrunk when Ellie reached out for her, she discovered the baby was gone. Ellie had never held a gun before, she'd never had a reason to. She suspected growing up farms meant her parents had used them but she had never thought to ask. Still holding the socks in one hand, Ellie lowered her other hand so it hovered over the gun's handle. She pressed her thumb against it until redness bloomed over her skin. As she connected herself to the piece, a spark close to pain shot through her chest and she had to open her mouth to breathe.

She wanted to hold it, but the vision of herself with the gun in her hands felt incongruous with everything she knew about herself. Ellie laughed but the sound scraped her throat and came out like a bark.

“You’ve been holding out on me.” Ellie replaced the socks and shut the drawer.

She turned and saw Jane watching her from the hallway.

Andrea

From where Andrea sat at the bus stop, the buildings on either side of the former bookstore formed a tunnel into the behind neighborhood. It was before noon but the temperature pushed ninety despite the rain yesterday. She unstuck her notebook from her leg and placed her pencil on the page. But she didn't move, her fingers warming around the thin wood.

Pages of small drawings crammed her sketchbook's pages. She did most of her sketches while sitting on this street, looking at the bookstore's remnants at different angles. But she also spent a lot of time at home drawing from memory. Most of the images were profiles of people she'd seen but the thick, dark lines of their heads had begun running together. Eyes jumped out from their spaces between foreheads and chins. Andrea smoothed her hand over a page and realized she should have given them something to look at. Knowing she hadn't given them a direction meant they were all waiting on her, aimless and cloudy.

She drew a half-hearted vertical line, bored by every face she'd seen so far. She dragged the line all the way to the end of the page, through someone's parted lips, and thought about what she would tell her mom at the end of the day. Maggie always asked and Andrea said she ran errands or saw friends, even though that wasn't true. Andrea

knew she should have gotten a summer job, especially after awards night. But staying with the bookstore felt more purposeful than a job at a golf course or being a waitress. It was comforting laying in bed and thinking about who she saw or the way the heat and time weighed on the trees that day. Sometimes she almost forgot about Carl. Still, she felt guilty around her mom and kept the sketchbook under her mattress.

The bus pulled up while she over-shadowed a man's hairline. People exited under the sign flashing *O Street* and *St. Monica's Hospital* including an older woman who hobbled over and sat beside Andrea.

"Waiting on my transfer," the woman said.

Andrea glanced up and smiled. She closed her book, using her thumb as a placeholder.

The woman had a layered, round face like the bones underneath had shrunk and left her with a permanent half-awake look. Her white hair stayed unmoved even when the hot wind from the bus blew at them while it drove away.

"What are you working on, dear?"

"Nothing."

The woman fanned herself. "It is so hot out here, let me tell you. You live around here?"

Andrea shook her head.

“That’s good. I don’t think any of these houses have proper air. But let me tell you from personal experience, it is a pain waiting for the bus this long.”

“I have someone picking me up.”

The woman tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and hugged her large bag close. Two more busses paused and drove away while the woman looked around the neighborhood with her chin held high. Each time the woman’s head swiveled toward her, Andrea tensed and forced her own attention on the ground. She slipped her finger out from where it marked her book. When Andrea’s phone rang, she jumped.

“Careful there.” The woman chuckled as the cell phone skittered across the pavement.

“I never have my sound on. I’m sorry. I don’t know why-“ she saw her dad’s name on the screen and the timer counting the seconds as the call waited for Andrea. They hadn’t spoken at all during or since awards night, and that length of time meant he was either angry or guilty. It was different every time. He might yell at her for never calling or slump through a required, barely ten-minute conversation that fulfilled his minimum fatherly requirements.

Andrea scratched her knee too hard until her skin flushed and burned under her sweat. Her thumb shook as she hit ‘answer.’

She tried sounding upbeat, rushed even, like he interrupted her. “Hello?”

“Andrea?”

"Yes...that's who you called."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm...." she looked at the silent neighborhood. Nothing moved, even the road remained empty and Andrea couldn't think of anything to tell him. "Nothing."

"You're lucky. Your sisters are always busy. No one answers their phones." He paused. "How's your summer?"

"It's fine. Hot. Mom- I want to clean out the garage some time."

"You working?"

A few minutes in and Andrea already felt winded. She pulled her legs under the bench and dropped her head in her hands. She hadn't told her dad about Carl and she wasn't sure where the idea of cleaning out the garage came from. But now she was thinking about him and wanting to talk but the risk of mentioning it to her dad felt too big. He'd make a joke or tell her to get over it, and Andrea hated him for that even though she hadn't said anything yet.

"Sort of. Not really. I don't know."

Her dad's laugh sounded too loud. The woman beside Andrea now had a book open but Andrea suspected she wasn't reading it.

"You getting a pay check or not?"

"Why'd you call, dad?"

"I just wanted to call and see what was up. I didn't get to see you when I was in Lincoln. I just came for that awards thing but then Charlotte decided to ditch and I had to get back here for a meeting."

"Oh."

"You should come visit. Before school starts back."

"I don't know if I can. I might take this summer class in August--"

"Before that then. Doesn't have to be for long."

Andrea pulled her phone away and let her head fall back. She felt sore and very tired all off a sudden. She rolled her head and felt the pleasant strain in her neck, but the old woman's wide-eyed concern threw her off guard.

She had spent seven long summers in Cleveland after the divorce. When her dad picked them up at the airport, he gave Andrea an awkward side hug and said half-jokingly he had a teenager that didn't think her parents were cool. It always felt pained, like she deliberately hurt her dad's feelings and should apologize. But she knew her aggressiveness came from the fact that Cleveland was so much work. From the moment Andrea and her sisters arrived, every activity, every conversation, every joke felt like heavy lifting. Their dad watched them, told them to relax and enjoy their summers. But he was idealistic, or more likely in denial, because only a few days later he'd call them lazy for sleeping past ten and claim they were wasting their time.

It was Ellie who stopped going first. Soon, Charlotte went alone.

“I-I’ll have to check and see what’s going on. Maybe.”

They spoke for a few more minutes until the silences outweighed the conversation. Andrea hung up and dropped her phone in her lap. Another bus drove by and Andrea prayed the woman would get on it, but she stayed put. Her long fingers smoothed the pages of her book over and over.

Andrea slouched and crossed her arms, hugging her notebook close. The bookstore looked different every time she saw it, but Andrea wasn’t sure why or how. When she’d first sat down, it seemed cleared and everything was pushed aside so the surrounding greenery and blue sky ran against the building’s black edges. But now those edges didn’t look so sharp. They looked cracked and crumbling, showering the ground with small rocks. Instead of pulling back, the walls collapsed back in, but Andrea wasn’t sure which one was worse.

Her phone vibrated and she read a text from some friends in her biology class inviting her on their summer bar crawl, wanting to relive their freshman year. *It’ll be so funny. Throwback.* they said. Her money was almost gone and she wasn’t sure when the last time laundry was done at her house. But Andrea ignored the ball of anxiety in her stomach as she agreed to go.

The group started a divey place known for their chicken wings. The long bar was covered in a shiny, honey-colored wood and the aisle between the booths and the bar was tight. So tight people held their drinks above each other’s heads to keep from

spilling. A TV in the back played a muted baseball game while the bartender ducked under the huge deer head mounted on the wall. Andrea sipped her beer and tugged her purple v-neck. Someone slapped her arm.

“Hey! You used to live with Claire Sedlacek, right?” A girl with glitter dusting the tops of her cheeks asked her. She held a clear cocktail and her arms were covered in silver bracelets. Andrea nodded. “Oh my god those pictures were hilarious. I needed that in my life.”

Andrea stared, her mind blank until the memory of the vibrator’s photo shoot hit her with hot embarrassment. “I didn’t actually take those pictures. And I-“

“I know. Dude. I get it. I bet it all got out of hand. But honestly, I heard they were major bitches about the whole thing. I would’ve done the same thing.” She laughed. “I mean, I hope I would’ve.”

“Wait, how do you know Claire?”

“We went to grade school together. Haven’t spoken to her in years but we’re still friends online and whatever. I see the important stuff.”

She was a little taller than Andrea, but not by much, and spoke with her hands as if pulling the room’s energy closer. Like Andrea, she had jeans and converse, but her blonde hair was pulled up in a high ponytail so the curls showered down between her shoulders.

“This is her!” the girl called behind her and Andrea discovered through others’ raised eyebrows and shrieks of recognition how much the vibrator incident had gotten around. They laughed, told their own dirty jokes and horror stories. Someone bought Andrea a drink and it wasn’t until the cold glass touched her lips that she realized her cheeks hurt from smiling.

“My name’s Sam. I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I’ve been showing you off like some kind of dog and you’re probably like ‘who is this weirdo?’” Sam set her empty glass on the bar and order another. “So did you find a new place to live?”

“I’m back at my mom’s.”

“Ugh. That sucks. My mom’s so annoying.”

Andrea shrugged. “It’s not so bad. I like my mom.”

The crowd grew and Andrea leaned against the bar as people passed. Her friends had made no indication of leaving and if she craned her neck, Andrea could spot the top of her tallest friend’s parted, hippie-like hair. Sam passed Andrea a full glass and she enjoyed the ease she felt in accepting it. For once she felt like she’d chosen the right things.

One of the bartenders looked at the clock before heading to the back of the room. After a few loud bangs he dragged the wall away, revealing the dance floor. Everyone cheered.

Andrea knew she was talking because her throat hurt but she couldn't hear the words. The bright room darkened and bodies bumped and rolled in waves. Her biology group faded away while Andrea told Sam about the movies she wanted to see, how she didn't like reading, and she was skeptical of the new pizza place downtown. The bracelets on Sam's arms jingled. After a while Andrea excused herself and pushed through the crowd. Women's jewelry reflected the multicolored lights while men's heads bobbed in and out of the shadows. Groups of boys stood along the perimeter, pointing out dancers in front of them. Andrea lurched toward the bathrooms.

The women in line turned toward her at once, each smiling in a half-hearted and impatient way. Mirrors lined the wall and Andrea pulled on her shirt, tucking in the front and then untucking it. She straightened, crossed and uncrossed her legs, bumping a girl in a flippy black dress.

"Cute shoes." The girl pointed to Andrea's black converse. Sam's glitter dusted the tops.

Music pounded on the other side of the door. Andrea felt disoriented like when she walked out of a late afternoon movie and discovered the sun had set when she wasn't looking. A stall opened and the overheard light flickered as it closed too hard behind her. Tiny square tiles in blues and tans and greys stacked over the wall and Andrea counted each one before someone knocked. But she couldn't catch her breath. She placed her hand on the wall and avoided the girls she passed. She was drunk. Maybe. Probably.

In the hallway she stood between the dancefloor and the exit toward the smoking patio. Diving back into the crowds felt overwhelming even if her friends were out there willing to catch her. She went outside relieved when cool air wafted over her cheeks. Her body shifted and she felt better. Maybe she wasn't so drunk, just overwhelmed.

"There you are!" Sam waved, a cigarette between her fingers.

Andrea stretched out her hands, enjoying the space. "I think I'm too old for this. My friends convinced me but now I think they're crazy."

"I know what you mean."

Andrea eyed the cigarette and worried Sam would offer her one. But she blew out smoke in a long stream instead of speaking.

"Do you go to the University?" Andrea asked.

"Yeah. For German."

"Woah. That's cool."

Sam smiled. "You're nice. But I'm regretting in now. I graduate in December and I have no idea what I'm doing with it. I've kind of lost interest, you know?"

"My older sister is – was – the same way." Car's headlights flashed through the wooden fence, distracting her for a moment. "She had this whole plan and suddenly ditched it. She still lives at home and I think she expects us to fix it for her."

Sam's eyes stayed on Andrea. Unlike in the bar, here she seemed calm while Andrea's cheeks tingled. "And, like, I don't even know what to do with myself most of the time so what does Ellie, that's her name, think I'm going to do for her?"

Silence fell and Andrea worried she'd crossed a line into the too personal. Maybe Sam didn't want to talk about that kind of stuff. That's fine, Andrea assured herself, not everyone is so filled with drama like you are.

"Hey, did you hear about the fire at the Spanish bookstore?"

Sam dropped the cigarette and it disappeared into the dark. Andrea wondered if she could even see where it landed as she dug her foot into the gravel. "I did. It sucks. I used to volunteer there."

"Have you seen it recently?"

"I thought it was all blocked off."

Andrea explained the building's appearance, growing more animated and spreading her arms around her. Her voice cracked and she struggled keeping her words steady. She imagined herself a version of Ellie: poised but relaxed, authoritative, confident and easy. She stepped back on her right foot, elongating Sam's gaze, but wishing she could step out of her own body.

Sam hugged herself. "That's crazy. I mean, I know some of the families that live behind there and they're all really nice. The kids are sweet. I didn't know they were just leaving it like that."

“They’ve got to be planning something with it. But I’ve been there a few times and it barely changes.”

“Maybe they are. I heard there are plans to clear the space and put something completely different in.”

“What?”

Sam twirled her lighter between her fingers. The door behind them opened and a few boys hopped out, sliding into the wood picnic table tucked under the awning close to the building. “I don’t know details. But my older sister works for that sports tech place up north. She said they put a bid on the space.”

Andrea’s face felt slack. Sam jumped and held out her palms. “But I don’t know for sure. My sister’s kind of a bitch anyway. Who knows if that’s true?”

Cheers and music rushed out as the backdoor opened again. Andrea’s friend grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer, telling her about a guy and a dance and her phone number. Her friend couldn’t see his face, but he smelled like Jack Daniels and vanilla.

“That...doesn’t sound good.” Andrea replied as her friend leaned against her arm. Sam asked if the girl was okay while Andrea closed her eyes and hoped she could orient herself once she opened them again.

Charlotte

“Have you been to The Goldenrod?” Charlotte asked Joy as she selected a jar of purple nail polish. It was old and a string of sticky paint stretched from the brush. Charlotte made a face and screwed it closed. Overhead, Joy’s mom paced and her footsteps thumped across the basement’s ceiling.

Joy thought a moment. “You know, I actually think I have. My grandparents took us all for my dad’s birthday once. It’s fancy.”

“Is it good?”

“Yeah. I remember liking their chocolate cake. But they’re known for their steaks, right?”

Charlotte concentrated on her toes. She hadn’t realized the purple polish had a metallic undertone and now worried it looked flashy. Charlotte had heard about their steaks. She also knew it was the oldest restaurant in town, owned by the brother of a former football coach. The tiny building was painted brown with dark green trim and had a wood sign propped up along Anderson Street. Charlotte knew its hours, its specials, that it got renovated once every two years and when it did, the *Journal Star* ran a feature.

It was as old as those models in the library, made from the same materials; designed the same. It was built to last, a fortress within the deteriorating neighborhood.

"My dad's not a big meat-eater though," Joy continued. "But he goes with his men's church group sometimes."

"Really?"

Joy pulled a piece of newspaper closer and it crinkled under her toes. Joy's mom kept the house freezing and they were both huddled over their knees and wearing bulky sweatshirts.

"I know, right? The place is even a little too frilly for me." She flapped her hand over her red toe nails, drying the paint. "Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking about all the old houses in Lincoln. You know, since we were at the library."

"It's kind of cool. I didn't know there was all this...history in town. And they've been preserved really well."

Charlotte frowned. "Yeah. But don't you think it's weird they spend all that money for a house? It doesn't need new mirrors and vases every two years."

"You're exaggerating. And even if they do, so what? There are other restaurants to go to if you don't like it."

"That's not the point."

Joy rolled her hand over the colorful jars but didn't pick one up. The containers scraped against each other and set Charlotte's teeth on edge. Above them, a door slammed and a boy's voice announced himself. Thunderous steps crashed together, interrupted by Joy's mom's laughter. Energy burst and collided until all at once, it stopped.

Joy rolled her eyes. "Patrick's home."

"You don't really think that, do you?"

"Are you deaf? Patrick practically--"

"No!" Charlotte pulled the sleeves of Joy's sweatshirt over her hands. "About The Goldenrod. They could be using that money for something better instead of doing this big *Extreme Makeover* kind of thing. Like, like...more parks. Theo was talking--"

Joy pulled away so she leaned against the yellow tapestry couch and glared. "What do you want me to say? I'm not Theo. Theo's an idiot." She waved her hand while Charlotte protested. "Sorry. But it's kind of true. And honestly, I don't care that much. It's a pretty building even if you can't afford to eat there."

The door at the top of the stairs opened and the two girls quieted until Joy's mom appeared. Her blue button-down was untucked from her pencil skirt and her short, brown hair smoothed behind her ears. Charlotte thought Joy's mom always looked smooth: one straight line from her head.

She leaned against the banister. "Sorry for interrupting," she teased. "I didn't know you were here, Charlotte. I didn't see a car."

"Joy picked me up. We're...short a car right now. My mom and Ellie kind of switch off the one that works."

"Are you staying for dinner?"

Charlotte looked at her friend. Joy's familiar, narrowed expression annoyed her even more than her comment about affording The Goldenrod. This was different for Charlotte and she wanted her friend to feel that way too.

Joy exhaled. "Do you want to, Charlotte?"

Charlotte nodded.

"That's fine. But Joy, sweetheart, you need to let me know when your friends are over."

"I *did* let you know. I texted you when I was driving."

"Joy!"

Charlotte straightened her legs and waited out their argument.

"Not, like, *while* I was driving. You know."

Joy's family always fought with their faces. Charlotte knew as she up righted the fallen jars and arranged them by color that Joy and her mom were passing wide-eyed, strained messages over her head. The brothers made louder sounds, grunts and cries

escaping their large throats as they charged from one person to the next. But the narrow basement remained relatively silent until Joy's mom sighed and asked if cheeseburgers were okay.

"That sounds great!" Charlotte replied and Joy's mom left, her hand twisting over the banister as she pulled herself upstairs.

Awkward silence lingered before Joy shook out her legs. "Hey, Karlie is having a bonfire tonight. Do you want to go?"

But Charlotte's mind was set on something else. If Joy didn't believe her when she explained, maybe she could see the crime for herself. Besides, Karlie Dunbar was annoying. She and Joy did one science project together that Charlotte was pretty sure mostly Joy's doing, and now they were friends. Charlotte always felt like a third wheel.

"We should go to The Goldenrod. You should see what I see inside."

"Seriously? After all that and now you want to *go*? I mean, the cake was good but it's really just a lot of old people. And I thought you've never been."

Charlotte opened and closed her mouth but stopped herself from explaining all the pictures she'd found online: the website, Facebook, friends-of-friends' graduation and post-concert desserts. Everything could explain felt outside the truth and she knew Joy would push against Charlotte's obsession without hearing the reason. She'd say Charlotte was being weird, tell her to get over it. Charlotte listened while Joy expressed

hope that Brandon would be at the bonfire. He was so cute and played guitar, her friend said.

She knew Joy wasn't trying to be dismissive. There was one time where Joy admitted she worried about Charlotte but brushed it off with a "like friends do." But Charlotte felt belittled by that worry, like Joy was using it as an excuse to keep from listening. *There she goes again*, Charlotte imagined Joy saying to Karlie.

"I'll go to Karlie's if we go to The Goldenrod before." Charlotte leaned back on her hands.

"Ugh. Fine. Weirdo. But help me with my outfit, okay?"

The Goldenrod was draped in white. Tables were covered in it, the napkins were off-white cream, the walls were eggshell. Walking into the restaurant gave Charlotte the sense of walking into light and she stood still at the front, waiting for her eyes to adjust. A waitress led them to a table after settling on the cushioned seat, Charlotte had a clear view of the explosive flower arrangements in their blue vases. Pictures of the Nebraska plains hung high on the walls so Joy craned her neck to look at the one behind Charlotte.

"Happy now?" Joy sipped her water.

Charlotte's stomach twisted as she read the menu. She hadn't thought much further than her own motivations for coming and now she felt confronted by the prices. She suggested they split a piece of chocolate cake. The waitress returned and Charlotte

ordered, pausing as if expecting more before a smile flashed over her face and she rushed away.

Joy's water had been filled during the exchange, but they hadn't seen the other waiter. Joy giggled. It was all so smooth and efficient. Charlotte unfolded and refolded her napkin, realizing the room was much larger than she thought when they arrived. Tables were spaced out so the paths between them curved like rivers, and light reflected off every surface. The room felt open and Charlotte's chest expanded until she saw her face, or a version of it, reflected in nearby surfaces.

The small caked was placed at the table's center.

"We'll take another." Joy said without looking at Charlotte. "We'd like two pops too, a Coke and...?"

"That's fine. I'm fine."

"She'll have a Coke too."

When the waitress disappeared Joy slouched in her chair. "I know, I know. But I feel silly just ordering a cake. I'll pay for the extra stuff."

Charlotte picked at the sparkling sugar crystals on top of her cake while listening as Joy talked about Karlie's. Charlotte's enthusiasm sounded fake and glued to her tongue. Here, in this place, as Joy chattered, it all felt so small in the scheme of things. She flipped her spoon over so she could see the curve of a nearby chair. Who cared about The Goldenrod? Who cared about Karlie, or Brandon? Every Catholic boy played

guitar. She alternated between her drink and the cake, the sugar settling between her teeth.

“You’re right,” Charlotte said. “This place is just...fine.”

“I told you. What’s your deal, anyway?”

“I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Maybe prove myself wrong, that it was actually some nice, historic landmark or whatever. But it’s not.”

“Not just that,” Joy scrunched her eyebrows and scanned Charlotte, leaning against the table. “You’ve been, I don’t know, sort of jumpy lately. Like, when I talk I don’t feel like you’re listening. Not because you’re being mean but you’re...distracted? And then you get all frustrated at yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Joy’s eyes widened. “It’s okay if you’re stressed out or mad at your sisters or something. You can talk to me.”

Charlotte wanted the conversation to end. No one ever believed she was fine, they heard about her parents, or assumed she was a teenager with teenager problems, like too much homework or boys. But she really believed she was fine, or would be if she was around people who measured “fine” closer to the way she did. She didn’t care about the boys at school, and her parents wouldn’t change, so she moved on from those.

“The library was really interesting and, I don’t know, sort of struck me in a way.”

“How so?”

Charlotte looked over her friend’s shoulder. “Maybe I’d feel different if The Goldenrod was a museum. Or the Ivy is a theater and that feels...more important? But it feels strange to put a fancy restaurant in a building like this. It doesn’t feel like it was built for that. Especially over here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, over *here*. The houses down the block are all low-income but everyone talks about how the Governor comes here.”

“I didn’t know that.” Joy tapped her fingers. “I wonder if my dad has seen him.”

Charlotte tipped her glass, but the ice slid down the sides and against her nose. No one had refilled her water. She excused herself, taking the long way so she could swerve around the tables and let her arm brush against the flowing fabrics. Other customers leaned toward each other, their lips close. Around the corner, the narrow hall was brightly lit but without the natural light from a window, it looked harsh splashed against the dark wood. It was darker here and disorienting. But Charlotte resisted placing her hands on the wall for guidance.

The bathroom held a vase filled with sunflowers on the granite countertop. She was alone but could hear the sounds from the men’s room next door. She chose the stall in the corner and pulled the heavy door closed. Carefully, she climbed over the toilet seat and balanced on the lid, running her hand along the wallpaper. Her fingers

traveled over the bulbous flowers caught between gold edges, their brown-tinted petals twisted in impossible shapes, until she reached the opaque glass of the single window in the corner.

Ellie

Jane wobbled through the backyard, squatting every few steps and putting something in her mouth. Ellie already stopped her twice from eating dirt and both times Jane screamed so loud a dog barked and now Ellie wasn't sure it was worth it. Kids ate weird things all the time. Ellie stretched her legs and returned her attention to the job listing site on her phone.

"What do you think of this?" she called out. Jane stopped, then waved, and Ellie took that as encouragement to save *Aircraft Maintenance Technician*. She wasn't even a little qualified but right now every job sounded possible. She applied for a special education teacher and an assistant at an interior design firm, neither of which would have interested her before but now seemed fascinating. She'd deal with the technicalities if she got interviewed. She saved another job at Game and Parks, whose description was at least vague enough she wasn't automatically disqualified.

A half-hearted morning breeze fluttered by and humidity drenched the air. When Ellie glanced up, she saw Jane's head bowed over her chest, her small body tucked behind blades of grass. She looked asleep until someone ran by on the bike path and her head perked up, following the runner until they disappeared into the trees.

"Yes, that looks nice." Ellie said when Jane dropped a leaf in her lap. Ellie picked it up and tried giving it back, but Jane pushed it away.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Jane gripped the chair’s wide metal bars and bounced. Her smile grew as she moved faster and Ellie could see the two small teeth on her lower gums before Jane’s head smacked against the chair’s arm and she fell back.

Ellie froze, startled by the light ringing coming off the chair and the matching vibration. Jane sat on the pavement, her legs splayed in front of her as blood flowed from her head. There was silence. Jane lost her breath, already red-faced, and then she screamed. Ellie rushed her inside, feeling the blood’s dampness bloom on her shoulder. In the kitchen Jane’s face was purple and fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Ellie couldn’t find the injury and so she grabbed the nearest towel and wiped the streaks from the child’s chin until she found the cut under matted hair.

The cut didn’t look like much and Ellie thought it had stopped bleeding. She refolded the towel for a clean spot but Jane resisted when Ellie came close. Jane placed her hand on her face and cried louder, fresh blood collecting around her fingers. Ellie saw Jane put the pieces together and figuring out what was happening as she pulled her hand away and her expression morphed in pained confusion.

“You’re okay. It’s okay. Don’t worry.” Ellie stuttered. They felt like lies. “This happens all the time.”

Ellie found another towel and pressed it against Jane’s head, feeling the child’s heartbeat beneath her fingers. She counted them by threes, comforted by the

mechanics, and held Jane close. Her own heart raced, incongruous with Jane's steady pace. She hoped Jane didn't notice.

Ellie lifted the towel. The bleeding had slowed and the cut was small but it looked deep. Jane whimpered, exhausted by her own fear and leaned heavily on Ellie's chest. Of all the things Theresa told her, Ellie was certain there had been something about emergencies, but Ellie strained through Jane's nap times and Theresa's dislike for children's television shows. She tried moving Jane off the counter.

"I know. I know." She muttered when Jane started crying again. A sob rose up in her own throat. With one hand still pressed against Jane, Ellie pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed Noah.

"I don't know what I can do." He said once she had explained.

"You were the first in my contacts. I don't know. You're...parental." Ellie tightened her grip. "I just need to know if I should take her to the hospital."

"I can hear her. Maybe you should. She sounds like she's in pain."

"It feels dramatic. Like I'm overreacting. Don't kids get hurt all the time?"

Noah shuffled something in the background. Smaller, indecipherable voices passed behind him.

"Oh my god, you're at work. I'm so sorry."

Noah comforted her in a low, even voice. "It's okay. But I only have a few minutes before they get weird. They just got all hung up about breaks and-"

“Noah!”

“Right.” He told her to wait a second and Ellie leaned her head on Jane’s. She hadn’t realized she’d been bouncing the way she did before Jane’s nap and she stopped, worried the motion hurt Jane more.

“You there?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I went to the bathroom. I think you should go to the hospital. You don’t have time to debate all the different possibilities I know are in your head right now.”

“But what if Theresa sees it as an overreaction? Or maybe she’ll see it like a bigger emergency than it is and I’ll get fired. Like, what if she thinks I can’t handle-“

“Ellie. Stop. Seriously.”

This wasn’t like her. Ellie could usually handle pressure but now found herself distracted by the faucet leaking behind her. Windchimes clinked beyond the kitchen window while Jane pulled at her shirt. Ellie breathed into the phone, hating that she wasn’t on her own side. On Jane’s.

“I’m scared.”

“I know. But it’ll be fine.” He spoke low and even like Ellie was a child. The tone should have bothered her but instead she felt her own tears build. He said he had to go but reassured her that, yes, kids do go to the hospital all the time.

Ellie cradled Jane, who seemed dazed as her large eyes rolled up at Ellie. She found the bright pink folder with Jane's medical records in the shelves by the kitchen table and carried them all outside. Ellie tossed everything in the passenger's seat and locked Jane in her car seat in the back. The blood had slowed, but Ellie wadded up material and stuffed the space between Jane and the seat's edge.

Ellie wasn't sure which hospital was closer. Jane whimpered each time they turned and Ellie wished she could tell the difference between cries of pain and ones of fear. She coaxed the stoplights into green and navigated through the one-lane streets. Lincoln looked unfamiliar now, the buildings smashed together and rows of houses blurred like watercolors. When the hospital did appear, it was all at once and jarring.

She carried Jane through the sliding doors and stood in the cold lobby. A nurse looked at them over her desk and Ellie grew hot at her nonchalance. But before she could charge the desk, a different nurse appeared at Ellie's side, her long fingers brushing Ellie's shoulder.

"Come here, sweetheart."

Ellie shoved the pink folder at the nurse. "These are her records. Her vaccinations, I don't know if she's at tetanus, but there should also be a parental consent form. I'm the nanny, babysitter. She fell and hit her head."

The nurse's expression remained unmoved as she studied Jane's injury. Thick grey streaks wove through her strawberry hair and twisted back in a low bun. Minnie Mouse danced across her scrubs and her nametag read 'Diane'. She moved in a series of

smooth, choreographed exchanges and gave Ellie the folder back while taking Jane in her own arms. While Diane led them through the halls, someone handed Ellie a clipboard.

Ellie only caught the first half of Diane's questions, the words sliding off the ends as if Diane was used to people watching instead of listening to her.

The doctor met them a few seconds later, introducing himself as David Koenig. He was tall, skinny, and wore very round glasses. "How long was she bleeding?" he leaned close and Ellie was surprised that Jane didn't resist.

"A while. It sort of started and stopped. I didn't keep time."

Diane's pen scratched over her clipboard as she took notes.

"What did you use to clean it?"

"I just used the towel." Ellie had never felt so inept. Panic pulsed through her and she could see now how much she'd done wrong. She shouldn't have called Noah. She should have come right away. She should have pushed Jane away from the chair.

He asked more questions before Diane looked at the cut again. She placed a large patch of gauze over it and said she'd return soon. Jane laid on patient table, her cheek squished and her body crumpling the paper underneath her. The worst part about resisting the hospital was that Jane had resigned herself to the pain, to strangers. Her body looked heavy on the table and Ellie abandoned her clipboard, gathering the child in her arms.

"I'm so sorry, Jane."

The door opened then, and Diane and the doctor reappeared. "It looks like your daughter will need something. The cut is deep, but not so deep she needs stitches."

"She's not--"

"Stitches wouldn't be wrong. But they can be difficult to keep clean with children this young." He sat on the rounded stool and faced Ellie while Diane smoothed her hand over Jane's back. Ellie stayed standing near Jane but sank into the hard chair so she could meet the doctor's eyes.

"Does she...have a concussion?"

David's smile was gentle. "No, she's okay. You did a good job too. Next time, though, it's a good idea to keep an antiseptic around the house. Are you finished with those?"

Ellie looked at the clipboard abandoned on the chair beside her. The forms were blank.

"That's okay. As long as we have your permission to go ahead, you can fill them out while we apply the gel."

Ellie started to protest, but he held up his hand. "The cut needs to be sealed or else it'll leak and she runs the risk of getting infected. Like I said, we can do stitches if you prefer. Some moms like the security of stitches."

"I'm not her mom. I just--"

“I understand. But you have a parental consent form?”

Ellie nodded and told them the gel was fine. The minute her pen touched the first page, Diane pulled open a drawer and the metal squealed. Ellie shivered and forced her head down, concentrating on keeping her hand steady. Diane and the doctor spoke quickly, their voices low and sharp. The yellow walls glared and overpowered Ellie’s vision, running over her lap like egg yolks. When Ellie looked up, she couldn’t read the clock.

Jane screamed. David’s voice rose over it and Diane said she could hold her down. It was a swift, direct statement that sounded efficient rather than brutal but still provoked a scream from Jane that made Ellie realize she now knew the difference between fear and pain.

On the drive back Ellie kept the radio off and the windows rolled up. Jane slept in her car seat and at each stoplight Ellie twisted around and placed a hand on the child’s chest, relieved by the familiar rise and fall of her breath.

Theresa’s new porch shone under the bright sun, giving the new paint a sheen that convinced Ellie it was slippery. She steadied herself between steps, careful not to wake Jane with her lessened, but still present, dread. Inside, dust particles floated through lines of sunlight. Ellie took Jane to her room and placed her in her crib so she didn’t rest on the drying sealant. The area around the cut flushed around the blistered

glue. Ellie stayed in the room and slid down the blush-pink wall, keeping watch through the crib's slats.

Ellie propped her knees up and stared at the missed messages on her phone. Andrea sent a picture of a colorful donut display, saying her new friend Sam worked there and could get Ellie one for free. Noah asked her to call when she could. Charlotte wanted to know where Noah bought his razor so she could buy one. She was overwhelmed, but grateful for the small silliness of their concerns. Except for Noah, she imagined her sisters' passive thoughtfulness, her name or face flashing in their minds as they stumbled across some question. They would have texted fast, pressing 'send' without thinking too hard. Ellie wondered if they'd already forgotten they'd sent them.

She tried responding but she grew frustrated as she typed, then deleted, seemingly simply replies. She felt like she should tell them what had happened and where she'd been, inclined to apologize for her late reply. But she didn't want them to know.

She was so tired.

She tried responding, but her mind filled with white noise. Words fuzzed between her ears. She was so tired. Her thumb hovered over her phone's screen when an alert flashed on. *Interview Request* stood out in the subject line and when Ellie bit her lip, she tasted sweat. She set her phone down without clicking, stared out through Jane's door and into the dim hallway, and cried. She pressed her palms against her eyes and felt light-headed and sick. Her sobs rasped, flooding out of her chest faster than she

could keep up with them. She struggled catching her breath, but each time she inhaled, she felt the relief of oxygen swirling through her head.

Jane slept, undisturbed.

When Ellie returned home she sat in her driveway until an unfamiliar car pulled up behind her. In her rearview mirror she saw Andrea saying goodbye to the driver, Sam, Ellie assumed, before pushing the door open with her foot. Andrea had her head down until she passed Ellie's window.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "It's so gross out."

"I had...a day."

Andrea kicked off her sandals and stepped in a patch of shade on the concrete. Her bag scraped against the pavement. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Jane fell. But she's fine. Just a lot of screaming."

A headache pulsed at the base of Ellie's head. Jane had calmed down and once she woke up, behaved almost as if nothing had happened. Theresa gasped at the word 'hospital' and clung to Jane the rest of the afternoon, but Ellie thought she seemed more upset by the disrupted nap schedule than the hospital visit. She told Ellie she'd see her tomorrow and by the time she left, Jane and Theresa were folded together in the overstuffed armchair.

Ellie had expected a lecture or tears bursting through Theresa's high-strung composure. Maybe the twins had prepared her for this kind of thing, but Ellie got the sense Theresa wanted it all downplayed, pushing Ellie out so they could restart tomorrow.

"Theresa's weird, right?" Ellie asked once they were in their house.

"You'd know better than me." Andrea rifled through a pile of mail on the coffee table. Her large tote bag swung around her body and pulled her off balance.

"You could set that down, you know."

"It's fine. I'm taking it upstairs. Hey, who's picking mom up from work?"

"I can, I guess." Ellie studied the window still covered with the curtain. She could see the long, winding sidewalk that roped around their neighborhoods, tying them together. Red-orange sunlight burned through the glass but, like the clutter, they had all gotten used to it. She didn't have to pick up her mom for another hour and she felt antsy and impatient, wanting to release the tension in her shoulders.

They couldn't let the house fall apart even more, and Ellie decided she should fix the window. She left Andrea and stood on the small stone step facing the garage, remembering where they kept their tools. Her feet grew cold on the concrete as she picked through the items and moved a bag full of aluminum cans. A few crashed and echoed through the space. Her headache bloomed wider but Ellie didn't stop.

Everything in the garage was dusty, used once or twice and then forgotten. Ellie picked up a small garden spade and squeezed the handle until the veins in her hand stood out. The blade was dirty, which was strange because they didn't have a garden. She couldn't think of the spade's use.

The garage held off heat well. IT would be so like her family, Ellie thought, to make things harder on themselves than necessary. They should use their garage, if not for cars, then for the relief. When Andrea appeared in the doorway, Ellie asked what she thought.

"How would we do *that*? You expect us to hang out in a garage?"

"I don't know. But we have this whole space we're not using." She paused in front of the dresser she used at her old apartment. It marked the small pile of furniture she should organize and Ellie tried not thinking about it as her life savings. She yanked open the top drawer, saw nothing, then opened the next.

"What are you looking for?"

"Tools," she slammed the last drawer shut, "for that damn window."

"They're not going to be in there."

"How about you help instead of being so judgmental?"

Andrea stuck out her tongue but padded into the garage, pushing aside a dinging chair. Ellie scanned over the other pieces. A pretty blue nightstand stood beside an upturned kitchen table. She wasn't sure why the nightstand had been rejected until she

approached and it wobbled on thin legs. She placed her palm on top and pulled open the single drawer where the dead snake lay, upturned.

Ellie stiffened, looked away, and brought her focus back. There were white flakes around his mouth, chapped, she thought. When Andrea first got him, Carl had been a flushed orange, like an early sunset. But now his colored drained and he looked used and faded.

“What’s wrong?” Andrea asked.

Ellie considered closing the drawer and telling Andrea instead of showing her. Or even sending Andrea inside before hiding the snake somewhere she couldn’t find him. She hadn’t made a decision before her sister appeared in her preliterary. Ellie breathed through the thin line between and lips and squeezed the drawer’s flower-shaped handle, the petals pressing into her palm. Her headache wrapped over her shoulders.

Her family collected so much: grudges and anger and even overwhelming joy and euphoria. But they took every event in their lives and let them fall in a growing pile. There was never any time for reflection or experience because they were forced to move to the next thing. They didn’t save so much as prepare, but for what Ellie didn’t know. And she wished she knew the one piece that would trigger the mountain’s collapse.

She felt Andrea brush against her arm, her skin the warmest thing in the garage. Ellie counted to three, and when she looked over, Andrea’s skin appeared waxy and slack. Her arms hung at her sides with an almost imperceptible sway. Ellie moved to

catch her but Andrea nodded, pushed her hair behind her ears, and walked back in the house.

Andrea

Andrea felt sick. She woke up surrounded by a hazy and unreal feeling. Her bedroom swam with shadow and she kicked her sheet off, wanting relief from the air's stickiness. Across the room Ellie slept against the wall while Charlotte faced up with her mouth open. Andrea rolled off her mattress and stepped around the mess until she stood over her sister, watching the blue light make shapes over Charlotte's face.

Rage swirled in Andrea's chest whenever she looked at Charlotte. Why couldn't she be like everyone else and hesitate around Carl, maintain her distance? Others' repulsion had kept him. But Charlotte got close and frightened him. She knocked him over.

Andrea didn't know what to do. After Ellie found Carl, Andrea went to bed, avoiding Charlotte. If she confronted Charlotte she worried her sister would remind her that Andrea knew the bookcase was too narrow. Andrea had been the one to startle Charlotte and the sudden movement caused the cage to fall. Andrea clenched her jaw and her eyes itched. If she were honest, she couldn't remember exactly what happened. It was a blur of anger and noise and panic. Finding Carl should have offered some closure but she preferred the uncertainty. Carl had been alive twenty-four hours ago, but now he was dead. She didn't want to move on without him.

The worst part was that she'd been over it a hundred times in her head, and sometimes she worried that Charlotte was right.

Charlotte was so still. Across the hall Andrea heard her mom's alarm buzz so she slipped out of their bedroom and waited for her mom downstairs.

"You're up," Maggie whispered. "You okay?"

"I don't feel well."

"I had a hard time sleeping last night too. I turned on the air conditioning, did that help at all?" Maggie sat on the edge of the coffee table and placed a hand on Andrea's head.

"I'm not that kind of sick, mom." She could smell her mom's floral soap floating between them. Maggie's kahki'd knees brushed against her cheek. "We found Carl. He was in the garage...dried up."

"Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry." Maggie pushed Andrea's legs back and made room on the couch before settling in the empty space. Andrea closed her eyes and wished there was room for her mom to lay down beside her or that she had the strength to sit up so Maggie could wrap her arms around her. But they stayed where they were and Andrea's shoulder ached as it pressed in the sunken cushion.

After a while, Andrea got the sense the world was opening up, drawing her mom away.

"Can you stay?"

“Andrea...I’m sorry, I can’t. But we can talk tonight, okay?”

She let her go, stunned by the urgency her mom couldn’t hide. Or maybe she didn’t want it hidden. Everyone was always moving so much faster than her. She thought about Charlotte, who must sleep like the dead from her overwhelming sense of importance, exhausted from being right all the time. In the kitchen, Maggie slid the coffee maker from the corner. A cabinet squeaked.

Charlotte had been so concerned about her own plans, her own space, that she didn’t take the time to consider the other people around her. Charlotte should have noticed Carl. She should have noticed *her*.

Andrea followed her mother. The coffee smelled dark and tickled her nose. Her empty stomach rumbled.

“You should go back to bed. Try and get some sleep.”

“No. It’s fine. Can I drive you to work? I need the car.”

“Ellie needs it for Theresa’s. Is she up yet?”

“Noah can take her. Or I’ll drive it over when I’m done.”

Maggie arranged plastic containers in a bright purple lunchbox Andrea got in first grade. It was covered in butterflies.

“So can I?”

Maggie ran a hand through her hair. "Okay. But you need to bring it to Ellie later. She should have a car."

The small clock ticked evenly and Andrea's knees ached under her own weight. She felt stupid for standing there and angry as she pictured herself in a different timeline without this heavy sadness. She wanted her body snapped back in place, pushing her joints and bones upright so she could look forward.

"Why haven't you fixed that yet?" Andrea pointed at the window still covered in an old bedsheet. Ellie had never found the tools.

"I know. It looks terrible. But I've been so busy. You know you're welcome to take a stab at it."

Maggie checked her things, searching for the small bag she kept makeup in. She had a lot of energy and Andrea kept blocking her path or stepping on her heels. By the time Maggie had everything and opened the front door, Andrea felt alarmed by the fresh, cool air. The bright sun burned her face and she couldn't see the sidewalk without following her mom's brown loafers.

"Maybe one of your friends' husbands could fix it. Or your friends. Girls' handyman night or whatever."

Maggie checked her rearview mirror and pulled out of the driveway. She waved at a woman walking her dog.

"Or we have other family, you know. What are they even doing?"

“Andrea, I know-“

“Like, I know we don’t have the money to hire someone and we can’t tell the clubhouse but, honestly mom, someone is going to see it anyway and report us. It looks like some kid tried to fix it. And you can see inside our house at night.”

“Not really. I checked on it the other night and it looks surprisingly-“ Train tracks rattled the car, cutting Maggie off.

“This is what we do. We just keep letting things break and fall apart and we leave them there. That’s why the whole place looks like trash.”

Maggie slammed on the brake and the car nosed in the intersection. Passing cars looked too close and Andrea pressed herself against the seat. Sun, bright, fresh, angry, spilled over the dashboard and on Andrea’s hands. She dragged her nails over her forearm and her mouth felt dry. She wished she could peel back the layers and find what hurt. Her pain felt tangible, an object she could hold up and let it melt. Or smash it.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Buildings fell away and the city opened around them, heat wavered over the widened streets. When they reached Markman’s, Maggie parked on the far end of the lot and yanked the keys from the ignition. Andrea braced herself for her mom’s lecture but instead Maggie handed over the keys, got out, and closed the door without looking at her daughter.

Andrea twisted in her seat and picked at the seat’s peeling leather before a knock on the window made her jump. Maggie stared back at her through the glass.

“I’m really, really sorry about Carl, Andrea. Truly.” She grasped the door to keep it from swinging shut. “But try recognizing when people help you, okay?”

Andrea nodded. Staying quiet even when her mom said ‘I love you’ and left. Once she was gone, Andrea climbed over the center console and wove her legs under the well, considering the best route to the bookstore.

Rush hour was in full swing and Andrea didn’t realize how fast she was driving until she almost hit a car in front of her on O Street, her chest heaving in panic and her legs shaking. A crash was the last thing she needed. But even the neighborhoods were crowded today. Usually when Andrea visited in the mornings there were only a few people milling around. As she parked in a parallel spot almost three blocks away, she could see the back end of the *10/11 News* truck and a row of shiny black cars. The small crowd looked out of place and she grew frustrated at the uninvited guests. She walked closer, unsure why she felt compelled to hide behind a tree.

There were a number of men in suits, some nicer than others, but the ones holding cameras wore shorts. One man stood in the former bookstore’s center. Andrea blinked, jarred by the way the buildings on either side framed him and the way he directed others by slashing his arms through the air. The man stood in front of the largest camera and adjusted his dark suit. He was bald, and his skin a peachy-paleness like a rubber band. And even though he looked in charge, he kept an obvious distance from the others, pulling away from handshakes too soon.

Andrea found a wrinkled napkin and a pen in her purse. She slid against the tree and pulled the napkin over her knee for a flatter space to draw. That man looked familiar; something about him stood out even if he wasn't the old bald one. He was tall, sort of, but Andrea thought he swept over everything with a sort of...amused expression. He walked slowly, hands in his pockets, before propping his foot up on a small pile of arranged bricks. His lips moved but he was too far and his voice carried away through the air.

The napkin tore and Andrea flinched when the pen scratched her knee. The image was small and sloppy, the man's chin leaking through the tear. She paused before pulling out her phone and texting Ellie.

Who is that guy Charlotte is obsessed with? She watched her phone for a few seconds before.

Who? Theo?

No, older. The guy. She's always mad about him.

Governor Murray?

What's he look like?

Andrea looked up. The man was walking down a line of men dressed in jeans and shaking hands, a huge smile over his face. Her phone vibrated and she hadn't realized how hard she'd been gripping it until she saw Ellie's name.

Like a giant thumb

Then that was him. Andrea crossed her legs, the napkin still resting on her knee and watched the group laugh, a stifled and overly masculine sound like they forced themselves for a joke that wasn't funny. Ellie texted and asked when Andrea would be by with the car, but Andrea let her wait. She wanted to figure out how to tell her sister where she was sitting, what she was watching. But it wasn't *what* they were doing but the *way* they were doing it, all bowed in toward the Governor and following him like a star.

Andrea took a picture of him with her phone, his hands outstretched as he gestured toward the emptiness behind him. *Look who's got some big ideas* she typed after attaching the photo. She imagined Charlotte's pale face spreading out, absorbing the text before processing its meaning. Red would creep up her neck and wash over her cheeks until she snapped up and searched for someone to yell at. That was Charlotte's problem, Andrea thought as the text finished sending, she always assumed someone wanted to listen.

That night, Andrea wavered between awake and asleep on the couch. The TV buzzed in a movie's hazy aftermath but she couldn't remember what she'd been watching. Sweat plastered her hair against her forehead and she tried moving without making the pain in her neck worse. In the distance, the front door opened and closed. It was so quiet though that Andrea wasn't sure it had happened. She sat up, the pain in

her neck pinched, and placed her hand over her heart. After a moment she knew whoever it had been was gone now.

Charlotte

At three in the morning Charlotte crept past Ellie and stood at the top of the stairs, watching the TV's blue light shiver and flash against the wall below. She was impatient but hesitated before each step. Her hand gripped the rail and she counted to ten over and over. Adrenaline took over when she reached the bottom and she slipped through the door, gasping as it slammed shut behind her. She didn't think whoever was in the living room called after her, but their imagined voices echoed in the back of her mind.

"I know what I'm doing," she insisted before adjusting the mirrors in the car. She felt incased in her long sleeves and skinny jeans, and she pushed her sleeves up before yanking them back down. It was hot and cold all at once. She rolled her window down as she drove but the stagnant air felt more uncomfortable than the car's total silence. The streets tricked her into thinking she was alone but she swerved whenever a car appeared in the lane beside her, their lights cutting through the dark.

She had made her decision before Andrea sent the text of the Governor camping out in the bookstore's space, before she saw all the promotions for a *New Lincoln*. Before she drove past a billboard with candy-colored graphics and faceless people waving at each other between slick grey buildings. They looked like toys.

She parked three blocks from The Goldenrod and waited. Shadows stretched off the trees and cast heavy lines in the road that twisted and deepened the space in front of her. The sky was clear and tiny stars poked through the swaying branches overhead. Charlotte twisted her hands around the steering wheel.

Hours earlier Charlotte told the hostess at The Goldenrod she forgot her sweater in the bathroom. The hostess had been leaning on the podium and her eyes drifted, unfocused when Charlotte walked in. Her curly dark hair was pinned back and hints of a red wine stain appeared from under her black cardigan. She smiled without her teeth while Charlotte adjusted her messenger bag's strap.

"The kitchen's closed." The waitress looked behind her. Two people still sat in a corner table. A man rolled out a vacuum. "Technically the whole place is closed."

"I know. I'll be fast."

Charlotte had hurried around the dining area, keeping her head down. A boy flapped a white tablecloth in the air and the ballooned fabric snapped before floating around his legs. In the hall, she watched her vague reflection in the shiny mahogany doors, five total, before pushing open the bathroom door with her shoulder. Everything was as she remembered it: the white granite, the tall wooden doors, the dark wallpaper. But the sunflowers had been replaced with dried petals that mingled with the lemon cleaning scent. Charlotte sneezed.

The doors were luminous with white paint. Charlotte located the small glass window in the corner. It extended a few inches from the ceiling and less than a foot

long. The remains of white-hot sun shone through the opaque glass while frilly curtains brushed the top of the single window. From her bag, Charlotte took out an old light blue sweater she'd found on Ellie's side of the closet. She wrapped the sweater around her fist, climbed over the toilet seat, and with her covered hand Charlotte pushed the window open. The stall's wall shook under her grip.

"Found it!" She had told the waitress, waving Ellie's sweater in her face.

Now the empty restaurant looked gutted. Its dark windows reflected movement like glassy eyes and the building's details shrunk back in hiding. But it also looked bigger in the dark, its boundaries undefined so Charlotte couldn't see the walls until she was close enough to touch them. Charlotte dragged her gaze up and found the opened window. She shivered. Dry grass wove under her pant leg and felt like small cuts against her skin. A car rushed by and Charlotte couldn't tell how far away the sound was before the houses and trees swallowed it. She pulled on a pair of Andrea's black gloves.

From her pocket she took out the Zippo lighter, the silver lines glittering between her covered fingers. Charlotte could see the lion's fangs drip moonlight and she almost laughed. Theo was so predictable. Balancing on an overturned recycling bin she held the lighter through the window, aiming for the curtain swaying in the slight breeze. But the flame wouldn't appear. She strained, lifting her heels off the bin but her thumb only grazed the lighter's wheel. She pushed harder and swiped her thumb over again, then again. The glove's fabric snagged and the bin shook underneath her feet.

She clutched the windowsill, spreading her feet wider and waiting for her body to slow down.

She caught her breath and reminded herself she could do this. The building was sturdy, like the Ivy, like those farmhouses, and would be okay. She pictured the tacky, fragile décor and the way the visitors smoothed their hands over the shiny objects, thinking that they deserved these things. But Charlotte could show them the way those things smoldered and disintegrated so that maybe they'd have second thoughts the next time they refilled The Goldenrod.

That was the difference between herself and the boy who set the bookstore fire. The people who could see the flames didn't deserve it. He hit a neighborhood already down, splashed gasoline and lobbed a match like a firework. It was all for show. But Charlotte researched. She concentrated.

The Governor would see the flames from his house and taste ash.

She felt the lighter's edges against her skin now, the glove's threads pulled and stretched back. She pressed and turned, a small flame jumped to life and lingered on the synthetic fabric. Heat bit at her face and she pulled back. The bin rocked and Charlotte fell, her shoulder slamming into the ground. Air left her chest and clusters of rocks stabbed her arm. Panic rushed over her as she tried standing. Her right arm felt like a ghost hanging at her side and she held onto it with her good arm.

Her thumb ached as she searched the ground for the Zippo lighter. She must have dropped it when she fell and she kicked gravel back until she saw the silver flash in

the dark. Charlotte stumbled, her left fingers clumsy and heavy as she picked it up and stuffed the lighter in her pocket.

She ran before she caught her breath.

In the car Charlotte thought of a spot on the edge of town in the airport neighborhood. The slope up wasn't high but it could be dangerous in the dark. There was a small iron bench at the top but wherever she stood Charlotte and her friends could see the whole town lit up and sparkling with tiny white lines on one side, and the airport runway's strips of blue on the other. The spectacle was pretty, like the sky reflected in a dark mirror.

As she drove away from The Goldenrod, she imagined each one of those lights popping and fizzling out, engulfed by something bigger.

Charlotte drove around Lincoln for over an hour before reaching home. But she kept looping around and glancing at her mom's front door before driving away. She was still driving as the sun rose, its rays clear and bright even though she'd expected a layer of smoke. She shook. The heat increased and Charlotte drove with her windows down. Her mouth felt dry in the still air. She arched her back and squinted, blinded as she drove through a red light. Her knuckles turned white and she counted the seconds until someone pulled her over, but no one came. Her right arm ached and she kept it close to her stomach. She didn't think anything was broken, the pain wasn't so bad anymore. But she couldn't really tell.

She circled Lincoln, driving closer and closer to the center before parking in a lot surrounded by construction and the iron works building. Orange dust floated around her and the ringing in the background made her grind her teeth. The air stung her eyes and she wiped the heavy tears away before getting out and waiting for when Theo rode by on his bike. She leaned on the car, parsing out the sounds around her and determining what was real and what was in her head. A police siren screamed and Charlotte pressed herself against her car and realized she was clutching the door handle when pain shot through her right arm. Then another went off.

Charlotte knew she should return the car but she needed to see Theo first. Her family could find rides or she'd go to Markman's herself and plead for whatever forgiveness her mom might need. She'd tell her mom Joy needed her, that a boy turned her down or her brothers had been mean.

She comforted herself with this story when her phone rang and Maggie's picture flashed on the screen. Charlotte pressed 'ignore' and watched as her mom's face, happy and squinting through the sun at a picnic, appeared again. Charlotte texted her she was sorry, that she was leaving Joy's now.

Charlotte felt a weird, detached sense of denial. It was like she was on a roller coaster and the safety bar had just descended. Her stomach felt tight and she knew that the bar meant the car would jump and pull forward without her control. But still, she was under a weird impression she could stall everything a little longer. Traffic flooded

the street in front of her and she forced herself to focus until Theo wove through on his bike. She waved.

“Wow. I can not believe this. Did you see?” he panted.

Charlotte said yes, she did. While Theo talked she realized she was still in her all-black outfit and she shoved her hands in the small pockets. He shook his head and slouched but Charlotte could feel energy coming off him and it felt like fear.

“It’s a mess. The entire neighborhood is covered in smoke and I had to ride an extra couple miles to get around it.”

“What did it look like?”

Theo shook out his shaggy hair. “I don’t know. I didn’t see it myself. It was The Goldenrod, you know that place? It’s a small restaurant but man, the flames...” he pulled out his phone and showed Charlotte pictures others had sent him. They were grainy and blurred, taken at bad angles so Charlotte could only piece together few cloudy edges through the smoke. She exhaled, relieved.

“It kind of sucks, you know? It’s a nice place.”

“What’s that?” A line of muted color ran from the back of the building.

Theo peered closer but said he didn’t know, that it was probably just from the person taking the picture. “Anyway, are you going today?”

“Going where?”

Theo jerked his bike up so the front wheel spun between them. “The protest. For the Haywood Expansion? I know you weren’t super excited but I think there’s going to be a lot of people there.”

“I-I don’t know. I wasn’t-“

“You know, I’ve noticed there’s always this lull in the summer. People get tired or too hot to go out, which can be discouraging. But once October or November comes we’ll have a lot more voices.”

“October is a long time.”

“Maybe. But it’s all about building ammunition so to speak.” He dropped his bike and leaned over the handlebars. “I’d never use that word around anyone else, but you know what I mean. The key is that we’re *building*.”

Charlotte blinked and tugged on her sleeves. Sweat pooled under her arms. “People will forget.”

“You’re so pessimistic. But trust me, this protest will work.”

He balanced on his pedals and looked off in Full Moon’s direction. His light grey shorts exposed more of his leg than most, revealing his sunburned thighs. He wore a plain white t-shirt and canvas shoes and the whole look seemed so flimsy to Charlotte. He looked too light, like a breeze could knock him over, but the worst part was his smile. His thin lips revealed large parted teeth as if he was always holding back a laugh.

Charlotte had watched him cultivate this look, this stance, even the gestures, until he wasn't just pleased, but comfortable. He really believed that was his natural shape.

Charlotte didn't want to see Theo anymore. She felt exhausted, dried up, and realized no matter how many ways she spoke to him, he would always interpret her actions for agreement.

She had driven downtown for his energy or a silent encouragement, things he handed out so easily to others. But now she had him and he was empty. She wanted to tell him what she had done. She needed him as a sounding board so she could articulate the strange words that were now working their way from her hands to her brain. She thought he would help her take the words and arrange them in front of her. But now they stood, listening to the muffled construction sounds behind them and she knew that she was never going to get what she wanted from him.

"I'll see you at the shop, k?" Theo pulled away from her.

"I don't like Full Moon anymore." Charlotte said. But he was already too far away to hear.

Ellie

Ellie stared at the coffee remains in her mug, deciding if she should make more. She was already jumpy, distracted by her interview the day before and the fire at The Goldenrod. The news was saturated with flames and smoke. Outside news stations reporting on the string of fires appeared and doubled traffic. Ellie was alarmed but the news had begun grating on her and she wished she never had to hear the worlds “Nebraska Nice” again. Conspiracies speculating Lincoln’s “seedy underbelly” made Ellie laugh, and she knew they’d all soon come to the same conclusion: that Lincoln wasn’t suddenly gotten interesting.

She left her mug and joined her mom in front of the TV. Maggie concentrated on the low, slow drawl of another interview.

“Mom, stop. You’re going to make yourself crazy.”

Maggie’s hard expression remained and Ellie wasn’t sure if she was being ignored or not.

“This will all blow over.”

“Elinor, I’m listening.”

“Mom-“

“Where are your sisters?”

The house’s walls popped, expanding in the humidity. Ellie shifted on one bare foot to the other, trying to measure the panic in her mom’s voice. Maggie crossed her arms so her hands held her elbows, her skin red between her fingers.

“I think they’re upstairs. Still asleep.”

“Charlotte too?”

“Mom, yes.” Charlotte had been facing the wall when Ellie woke up. But Ellie didn’t mention how Maggie’s open bedroom window had blown open their own door, sending the knob into the wall and leaving behind a black mark. When the knob smacked, Charlotte emitted the strangest shriek, sort like Jane, gagging for air.

“I don’t think she slept well.” Ellie added.

The TV zoomed in on a family portrait, fuzzy and faded. They had left paint cans out in their backyard and the fire traveled along the dry grass before catching their house. The mother and son had died, the father was in critical condition.

“Mom, sit down.” Ellie could feel the small hairs on her mom’s arm, but she stayed close and watched the story play over and over.

“Does this one feel...different?” Maggie asked?

“Maybe.”

A blonde woman stood so Ellie could see The Goldenrod in the background, the edges charred and the windows black but the fundamentals of the building still intact. The reporter extended her arm so the camera lingered on the restaurant's façade. Ellie's eyes watered until she remembered to blink.

The roads beside The Goldenrod were vacant. Ellie wanted to get closer and see if there was any ash on the reporter's white collar. How much farther could the fire travel? The assumption, she explained, was an electrical fire. But authorities hadn't ruled out arson.

"Do you remember where you were for things? Big events like 9/11 or Katrina?"

"Sort of." Ellie turned the volume down but left the image playing.

"For some reason I'm thinking about that. I was grocery shopping when Michael Jackson died." Maggie laughed uneasily. "Someone took my shift at Markman's and I thought 'I can get the kind of ice cream I like.' I was excited not to have to compromise with you guys."

Ellie couldn't respond. She stared at the side of her mom's head, making sense of the turning gears and uneven paths. "I never remember those things." Footsteps thumped overhead. "It's all a blur for me."

Out the glass door and over their backyard their neighbors had their blinds closed. The sun was bright and the grass hyperpigmented, bleeding up in the sky. June was melting into July and soon firework haze would float through the neighborhoods.

The holiday was so entrenched in noise and fire that Ellie often through of it as one filled with anger instead of celebration. It would happen sooner now too, as if the fires caused people to rush toward the familiar catharsis.

“I don’t have to go to Theresa’s today. I can stay.” Ellie offered but Maggie didn’t respond. “Or you could come with me. I bet you and Jane would get along. She’s getting chatty lately and she’s not so-“

Maggie exhaled, tossed the remote on the couch behind them and went in the kitchen. Ellie followed and watched her measure out more coffee. Her hair was flat at the top and frizzed around her shoulders. She wore a grey shirt with a metallic print but her shorts were a navy pair she’d worn to bed, as if she’d stop dressing halfway through. As the coffee maker bubbled, Ellie went outside to call Theresa.

As she sat on the porch’s bottom step and extended her legs in the sun, Theresa agreed that she should stay home. She wanted Jane with her today anyway, who screeched in the background.

“I’m sure it was just an electrical thing,” Theresa lowered her voice, “but with that fire at the bookstore, I’m worried. Lincoln just isn’t what it used to be. That *poor* family. I actually started locking my car when I go shopping. I didn’t have to do that when I first got married.”

“You never locked your car?” Ellie couldn’t hide her surprise. The idea of paranoid, list-making Theresa trusting her vehicle to the HyVee parking lot confused her.

“I know. Besides, that part of town has always been unsafe. But it’s always been...contained.”

James Taylor floated through the window and a lawn mower rumbled in the distance. Ellie shifted the phone from one ear to the other. “My friend Noah lives over there and hasn’t had any problems.”

“Oh I didn’t mean it that way, dear. I’m sorry. Anyway, the best thing to do is keep our lives moving as normal. Are you free Sunday? I think I’ll have a party.” She elaborated on the decorations she could get from her store: bright pink hibiscus banners and pineapple-patterned plates. It would be so fun, so comforting to have a house filled with friends. Her voice built and towered, pushing out the speaker until Ellie pulled the phone from her ear, dizzy.

But the words didn’t make sense. Ellie nodded, encouraged Theresa in uncommitted mumblings and hums. It was like there was a thin sheet of plastic between the two of them, both of their voices muffled so that meaning was generally conveyed, but they could never fully reach each other. The edges of their lives were warped, Mary’s vowels bloated while Ellie’s struggled pushing through. This isn’t right, Ellie felt but couldn’t unstuck from the roof of her mouth.

“I feel so much better, Ellie. I think this is exactly what we need.”

“Theresa,” Ellie cut her off, “Do you remember where you were when Michael Jackson died?”

Theresa paused and Ellie worried she'd caught her too off guard. Embarrassment heated her face. "I'm sorry. That's so...my mom and I were just talking and I wondered."

"That's fine." She hummed and Jane's babbling dipped closer. "I was probably at work. I feel like I'm always at work though. But I never listened to that much Michael Jackson."

After she hung up, Ellie smoothed her thumb over her phone's screen. The door behind her unstuck and Maggie came up behind her, drying a bowl with a towel.

"Theresa's having a party Sunday. We're all invited."

Maggie rolled her eyes but nodded, turning the bowl around and around in her hands. Ellie could see her mom's shadowy hand through the opaque plastic as it passed through the inside.

"Can you make sure your sisters are awake? It's getting late."

Ellie said she would and raced upstairs so her steps thundered. She smacked the walls, hoping the noise would wake Andrea and charlotte, but also grateful for the way it unwound her nerves. When she reached their room she saw Andrea easily, splayed out like a starfish and her mouth open. Ellie kicked the mattress.

"Get up!"

Andrea didn't move. Ellie kicked the bed again and a snorting sound escaped Andrea's throat.

"I know you can hear me. It's almost noon. Come on."

Andrea groaned, gathered her quilt to her chest and rolled away. Ellie crouched down, about to say something in her ear when Andrea yelled.

“I’m waking up!”

Ellie backed up and prepared herself for something worse from Charlotte. But Charlotte’s blankets were already pushed aside, one pillow on the floor, and the bed empty.

“Where’s Charlotte?”

Andrea mumbled something while Ellie checked the light under the bathroom door, but it was dark.

“I saw her when I woke up. Did she leave?”

“How should I know?”

“You share a room with her.”

“So do you. It’s not my job to watch her.”

Ellie held up her hands and let Andrea wake up on her own terms. Everyone was on edge today. She stopped halfway down the stairs and shook out her arms.

“They’re awake.” She joined her mom at the kitchen table and took a sip from Maggie’s coffee mug. “Charlotte’s a Joy’s.” she lied. Maybe. She was probably at Joy’s.

Maggie extended her hand so Ellie could place her own between her mom's warm fingers. An article about the upcoming state fair lied open underneath her free hand, her finger marking a spot in a paragraph.

"I wish you guys would do a better job at telling me where you are."

"We try."

Maggie's eyelids lowered halfway over her cloudy blue eyes until she widened them and released Ellie's hand. "She's fine. I'm sure she is. I'll call Joy's mom later to make sure."

Behind Maggie, the bedsheet covering the window had been pushed aside and sunlight streamed in the room. The walls looked stark and Ellie could see stray hairs raised from her mom's head in the hazy air. To the right, an elongated picture frame held each of their school photos from eighth grade, third, and pre-k. Charlotte was doughy with a gummy smile, Andrea's chin was raised too high, and Ellie looked, in Andrea's words, tragic. The picture had caught her in that perfect in between stage of child and teenager, her cheeks still padded with baby fat but pimples visible near her nose. Her haircut was a blunt, almost aggressive bob like she had taken a saw to it the night before, and her eyes were purple with exhaustion. Ellie hated it and begged her mom to remove it. Use her junior year picture, or the one from sixth grade. But Maggie insisted on keeping this one.

The worst and most comforting part was that both Andrea and Charlotte agreed that the picture was terrible, and whenever their mom had her friends over one of them

helped Ellie take it down and hide it. Last year, Charlotte started replacing the picture with anything she found on the internet: movie posters, printed song lyrics, stock photos of actual beautiful people. It became a game to see who could find the most outrageous image and wait for which of Maggie's friends commented first. Maggie let it happen, grateful her daughters joined forces on something as long as the original photo was returned.

Ellie dragged the comics close but couldn't move past the first panel.

Andrea

Almost a week after The Goldenrod fire, Andrea had gotten in the habit of sleeping too late and feeling the days move by too fast. The house was hot because Maggie wouldn't turn on the air conditioning after the latest bill, and Andrea considered going back to sleep and starting over. She wandered between rooms, feeling trapped in the small house. Maggie was at Markman's, Ellie was babysitting, and Charlotte...Andrea had no idea about Charlotte. All week she'd been passing in and out of the house like a ghost. She'd tuck herself in a corner and mutter something about Joy's before rushing past them, disappearing for hours.

It was one of the reasons Andrea was so exhausted. She'd be half asleep when the front door would creak open, followed by Charlotte's shadowy figuring rustling through their room. By the time Andrea woke up, it was almost noon and Charlotte was gone again.

Andrea fell on the couch, dragged the clunky laptop on her knees, and searched *Lincoln, Ne fires*. Most articles were brief, but the pictures had increased since the fire five days ago. There cell phone videos and amateur photos posted on social media pages and blog posts about the possibilities of Lincoln's high crime. Andrea unfolded her sketchbook and sketched the photo of The Goldenrod's hostess. She was pretty, but her expression was vacant and stretched over her thin cheeks. She claimed to have seen

someone the night of the fire, but more time was spent on the smoky, skeletal images of the destroyed house and restaurant than on her speculations.

Andrea studied another picture of the memorials set up in front of the family's house. Flowers, flags, and homemade cards covered the sidewalk outside the caution tape but they didn't cover the house's dark exterior. Her nose was almost touching the computer screen when her phone vibrated.

U ok? Her dad asked.

Yes?

Saw the news. What is happening to ur town?

Andrea blew a piece of hair fallen in her face. He always made her feel defensive but she refrained from reminding him that it was his town too, he grew up here. Before she could think of a response, her phone lit up again.

You could come here the summer.

Andrea groaned and stewed in the unresponsive house. She hated him for putting her in a position of saying no.

Charlotte is. Come with her.

Andrea tossed the phone to the side. She didn't know what to do about Charlotte. Time had diluted her anger toward Charlotte and she'd decided projecting constant rage at her sister was more work than simply letting her exist in a shared

space. A trip to Cleveland with her seemed extreme though, like she'd be forcing a friendship out of survival instead of actual enjoyment.

The front door opened and closed, and whoever it was rushed upstairs. Andrea slowly closed the computer and went to the bottom of the stairs. She'd catch Charlotte now and ask her why she was leaving, try and gage her motivation for Cleveland in the first place. Andrea was so unmotivated that maybe Charlotte could convince her. There was silence, and then a *thunk* of something heavy falling. Andrea climbed up and collided with Charlotte in their bedroom's doorway.

Charlotte carried a half-opened backpack. Over her sister's shoulder Andrea could see their messy and chaotic bedroom. Ellie's bed was the only one made and the line of rejected clothes that divided Andrea's from Ellie's side was visible. Charlotte's open dresser drawers stuck out from the side.

"Going somewhere?" Andrea craned her neck over her sister's fuzzy head.

"Joy's. I'm going to Joy's house. To sleep over."

"You've been going there a lot lately."

Charlotte's face twisted in confusion before she pulled it straight. "We're on a movie marathon right now. We can't stop while we have momentum."

"Okay...but you can't hold the one working car hostage."

"I bet the other one works now."

Andrea frowned and let silence fall over them, waiting for Charlotte to hear how stupid she sounded. When she didn't respond Andrea rolled her eyes.

"Hey, why are you doing to dad's? Does mom know?"

"I-I'm going to tell her. And you know dad. He was all insistent and made me feel guilt. One of us should be nice to him every once in a while."

"Okay."

Andrea wasn't sure if Charlotte was avoiding eye contact until something racked her body and Charlotte straightened and looked right at her. The lines in Charlotte's face pulled forward and the blue veins were visible from under her pale skin. Andrea hadn't noticed it before, but she could see how easy it would be for Charlotte's skin to betray her. Charlotte, who was so stoic and stony all the time, could be exposed by a blush or the sudden absence of color. The landing was darker than downstairs, the afternoon light strained over the small square carpet. Charlotte moved in and out of the sun, squinting as it flashed over her grey eyes.

Pity for her sister swelled through Andrea and she felt her frustration melting away. Charlotte was seventeen, probably overwhelmed and confused all the time. She wanted to make their dad happy. Andrea shoved her hands in the pockets of her jean shorts while heat pricked between them.

"Hey," Andrea whispered. "You can do what you need to do."

Charlotte's gaze dropped. Andrea turned her ankle until it popped. She wanted to tell Charlotte that she understood, that there were moments where everything sucked and not having a job and being a junior in high school made it all worse. She wanted to tell Charlotte about the real reason the window wasn't fixed and how bad she felt for making their mom feel worse about it. They could brainstorm ways they could thread their family back together, tight and permanent. But still visible. We don't have to live like this, Andrea thought.

Andrea held out her arms. Charlotte hesitated before leaning into her sister's embrace, but her arms stayed limp at her sides. They stayed close for a moment and Andrea felt a gear shift inside her. She felt like when she slid her house in the lock and heard it move and click, letting her know she could open the door and surround herself with the familiar four walls. She loved that brief moment of relief that something worked the way it should.

They pulled away. Charlotte bit her lip and small circles of light dotted her cheeks. The shades in their mom's room rattled under a breeze. Charlotte zipped her bag closed.

"I need...to get out of here."

"I get it." Andrea replied.

"Could I keep using the car?"

"Yeah...but drive me to Sam's? Then you can take it wherever you want."

Charlotte led the way downstairs and Andrea refrained from commenting on the other things she collected in her bag, like handfuls of granola bars and band aids. She tucked her sketchbook in her own tote bag. Charlotte seemed ready when she stood near the couch, her hand clutched the corner as she stared at the wall, unblinking.

“Are you...okay?”

Charlotte nodded and turned toward the door.

It was hot outside but it was also a relief after being inside all day. The breeze carried pollen through the air and Andrea rubbed her nose as they drove away.

“What movie are you and Joy watching?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t have a theme or...?”

“Oh. Joy’s been wanting to watch the new *Paranormal Activity*.”

“You’re braver than me. I hate that found footage stuff.” Andrea laughed but the sound felt rough on her throat. The words confused her, like she wasn’t sure what the funny part was. She watched Lincoln pass by through the window, clutching the door’s ledge as they rattled over the train tracks. They slowed at a red light, but when it turned green Charlotte slammed her foot on the gas and the car revved.

“Jeez. Calm down.”

“I’m fine.”

They swerved left. The car next beside them laid on their horn and sped away. Beyond Charlotte a teenage boy shook his head, perched high in his SUV, but Charlotte kept her face forward. She looked pale, her eyes glassy and her chapped hands gripping the steering wheel.

Andrea pointed to a mailbox shaped like a red barn. "It's so weird being on this side of town after going downtown. They're like two totally different worlds."

When Charlotte didn't respond Andrea kept talking, filling the dead air around them. "Lincoln isn't big, but it's not tiny. I don't know why but I kind of expected there to be police cars everywhere and sirens and people looking all panicked. That's what the news makes it sound like at least." They were almost at Sam's, speeding down eighty-second street like they were being chased. Andrea hadn't seen Charlotte this zoned out before. They passed an open field, the grass long and the trees removed. A blurry red construction sign flashed beside Andrea.

They turned on Sam's street but Charlotte slowed abruptly and Andrea coughed when the seatbelt restrained her. Her bag tipped and her notebook slid out. Andrea stuffed it back in while they crawled past the houses and Andrea clasped her shaking hands in her lap. A block from Sam's, Charlotte parked.

"I killed Carl."

For a moment, Andrea couldn't remember who Carl was. The letters sounded like a puzzle and Andrea arranged them in her head when a second later, it hit her.

“You did.”

“I’m sorry. Really. I didn’t think he would really die. I didn’t mean for that to happen. I was angry because you moved back without telling me and I lost my room and the space got so small and you know I didn’t like him anyway. Maybe at the time I wanted him dead but it’s not like I poisoned him. I just wanted him to be...not there. But I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You tortured him.”

“I wish I hadn’t done anything.”

Charlotte was crying so hard her face looked bruised. Andrea recoiled and covered her ears, not caring if she looked childish. When Ellie had found Carl, Andrea cried too. She also cried when Ellie said she didn’t want to be a lawyer and when her roommates left and when her dad’s anger swallowed their family whole and when she and her sisters waded through all the frustration alone. But now her tears were gone and she was so tired. Mania curved inside her and she tasted salt between her teeth. Charlotte babbled on the other side of Andrea’s palms but it meant nothing. Her body, her world, felt new and everything shone with such a sick vibrancy. Andrea closed her eyes, feeling the final pillar of stability shift.

She got out of the car, slammed the door, and left Charlotte.

Ellie

Ellie woke up Sunday ready for Theresa's. She double-checked her bag, making sure she had everything including the stuffed rabbit she'd accidentally taken home the week before. She sat in front of the full-length mirror and applied her mascara while Maggie sliced fruit in the kitchen. The knife's slices echoed from downstairs.

Ellie hadn't worn make up in a long time and she'd noticed her skin was better for it. She also noticed that she was looking forward to seeing Jane again. She had settled in the routine, comforted by the cat-like way Jane curled in her lap as they sat in the backyard and watched the grass sway. Jane was still unpredictable, her injury hadn't subdued her at all and it was difficult for Ellie to keep from focusing on the raised scar jutting out from under the child's hair. But the way she exploded in discovery at new foods or bugs or the change in air charmed Ellie and she clung to that, conscious of the hospital incident whenever Jane slowed down. She hadn't talked about it with Theresa since the day it happened, but the proof was always there, present on Jane's forehead.

"Mom?" Ellie called once satisfied with the soft pinks and browns on her face. "Are you ready?" She gave her bedroom a once-over before shouldering her tote bag and heading downstairs. She squinted at the bright light piercing through the small window and slipped on the last stair, the rug burning her bare foot. As she shook out the sting, she scanned the driveway but only saw the broken-down Ford.

“Are we taking the Ford?” Ellie bit a large piece of watermelon left on the cutting board.

“I called Charlotte because I think she has the Camry, but she didn’t answer. So...I guess.”

“Will we make it?”

Maggie wiped her forehead. “I’ve taken it to work once or twice and it worked okay. But cross your fingers.”

Ellie helped her mom pack up the other fruits, cantaloupe and strawberries, while Maggie finished with the watermelon. The kitchen was cool despite the open shades and sun spilled over the counters. Patches of light bloomed in spots where Ellie could rest her hand and feel the warmth on her skin.

“Have you talked to Andrea?” Ellie asked. “She’s been...”

Maggie sighed. “I know. I hate when she isolates herself like this. She started crying when she picked me up from work yesterday but didn’t want to talk about it.” She shook out her hands and pink liquid spattered over the counter. Ellie washed the knife.

Since The Goldenrod fire Ellie noticed her mom taking inventory more often. She’d drop her gaze or scan a room, her lips forming half-words as she counted the books, then nearby envelopes, then her daughters. Ellie waited until her mom straightened, smiled, and insisted she was almost ready.

"I should change my shirt." A large patch of water splashed over her stomach.

"Oh, wait. Andrea bought something the other day." Ellie retrieved a white plastic sack from Markman's and pulled out a white blouse. She held it up, its half sleeves dangled on either side while thin tassels looped around the collar.

Maggie pursed her lips. "She bought that?"

The tag was still attached. "Surprising right? She doesn't usually wear this stuff. But it has the tag so you can return it when you're done."

"You can't do that!"

"Sure you can. I do it all the time."

Maggie frowned and wrapped the edge of her water-stained t-shirt around her finger. Ellie felt bad pushing something that might get Maggie in trouble at work but she also thought Maggie should have something new for Theresa's. But as Ellie handed over the blouse she thought that Andrea had purchased something so out of her style concerned her. Andrea preferred clean, sharp lines and jewel tones, and Ellie pictured a frightening image of her sister wandering through the store half-conscious, unable to see what was in her hands.

Maggie smoothed the neckline over her palm. "She needs to stop...buying things."

"It's not buying if we can take it back."

Even though understanding feathered through Maggie's annoyance, Ellie knew her defense was weak. But she grasped whatever positivity she could find for now. The air felt brittle and she imagined one wrong turn could fracture something around them. She'd begun feeling this fragility in other places too, like Noah's and sometimes at Theresa's. Tension sprung up and Ellie pleaded *Not here. Go away.*

Maggie's shoulders fell. "You know what? I'll just let Andrea have this one. I'll talk to her later but...but for now..."

While Maggie got ready upstairs, Ellie called Charlotte but got her voicemail. When Andrea answered, her voice sounded clogged.

"Are you okay?" Ellie asked.

"Not really."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the park over by that rehab place. It's by our house."

It wasn't that close to their house, at least two miles, maybe more. But Ellie struggled believing Andrea had walked that distance. She brushed a few stray crumbs off the table and hoped the silence would invite an explanation.

"Can you come get me, Ellie?"

"Yeah, we can."

"We?"

“Mom and I are on our way to Theresa’s. So it’d be the both of us.” Andrea’s gasp rippled through the speaker. “Are you going to be okay until we get there?”

“Yeah. I’m just sitting at a picnic table.”

Maggie reappeared in the blouse and a navy blue skirt. Ellie thought she looked nice but her smile wavered when Ellie mouthed Andrea’s name. She held her hand out for the phone.

“Andrea? What’s going on?”

Ellie couldn’t hear her sister’s voice from where she stood and her mom turned away so she could only pick up the low snap of consonants. Ellie arranged expired coupons and bills, stacking them high enough so they sloped over the table. She threw out a small pile of expired coupons and tried packing the containers of fruit, but they wouldn’t fit in a bag.

In the garage she stood on the single concrete step as her eyes adjusted in the dim light. She waded through the recycling in search of a box for their supplies. There were so many shoe boxes, kept for gift packages or picked up from Markman’s “just in case.” When Ellie found a large enough box she leaned over a container of aluminum cans and came face-to-face with the nightstand she had found Carl in. Ellie tensed. The box’s cardboard flaps rubbed together as it hung from one hand. With her free hand she wrapped her index and middle finger around the stand’s knob. Her jaw ached as she opened the drawer and looked at the empty space.

She didn't know what she had expected but she was grateful the result was different. She tightened her grip around the knob until she heard her mom shuffle behind her. Still holding the drawer Ellie listened while Maggie explained they needed to go.

Her hand felt sore as she balanced her bag and the box in her hands. Maggie locked doors behind them and helped Ellie put things in the car before handing over the keys. She still had Ellie's phone at her ear. As they pulled away and their house grew smaller in the rearview mirror, Ellie felt the familiar grief wash over her. The positivity she'd seen in the mirror dissolved, already becoming a warped and inaccurate memory. The car stuttered under Ellie's feet.

"Are there any kids at the park?" Maggie asked. "A few? Is it a park with swings? I hope so, you guys were crazy about swings." She paused during Andrea's replies.

The park wasn't far, but in the opposite direction of Theresa's, near a Catholic elementary school.

"Oh and here's another red light." Maggie hummed. "I know. They do need a better system here."

The weather was beautiful, a rare Nebraska summer where gentle breezes soothed the heat. Ellie took her hands off the wheel and tapped her foot on the brake as they shuddered through a neighborhood where the houses disappeared behind oaks and ivy. the car plunged in shadow as the trees arched overhead. Soreness still pulsed

through the spot in her hand where she'd held the drawer open, but in a hollow, phantom-like way. At a stop sign Ellie checked her palm, surprised there wasn't a bruise.

Andrea

Andrea pressed her phone closer even as sweat welled up between her ear and the screen, comforted by her mom's steady stream of words. A young woman lingered by the table and Andrea sunk back, pulling her sketchbook close and lowering her voice. She told herself she didn't care if others saw her crying, but now she felt conscious of the way she disrupted everything. Kids screamed in the park behind her. Sand slid underneath their shoes and dogs ran toward the lake.

This was closure, Andrea realized, the knowledge that her horrible sister had killed her snake. That she left Carl starving and faded. Now Andrea could push through the final stages of grief. That's what they taught at St. Wensc when someone died. It was closure knowing that people went to heaven and their pain was over. But applying that logic now felt stupid.

Andrea's head weighed her down and she laid it on the wood table. The air felt like a solid mass and she hoped that if she closed her eyes she would sink further in the earth.

She hated St. Wensc at that moment because if this was closure and all this new information was helpful, then what would they say about Charlotte, the source of her grief? They'd tell Andrea she should forgive Charlotte. But the thought of forgiveness

made her sick. She pictured Charlotte's patchy tear-streaked face or her aggressive haircut and condescending gaze and cried harder.

"Andrea? Are you there?"

She nodded before she realized they couldn't see her.

"Andrea?"

Sobs flooded her chest as she asked, please, were they close? Her mom assured her they were on their way, told her it would be okay. But it wouldn't be okay. Panic pulsed through Andrea and she shot up, scanning the parking lot. What should she say when they got there? Andrea would have to tell Maggie and Ellie what Charlotte had done and they'd leave the park seeing Charlotte as a different person.

She remembered when Claire and Lydia kicked her out of the apartment. At the time Andrea felt hot and filled with adrenaline. She had stolen Claire's vibrator because she could, because taking action felt better than sitting around and wondering. But as Andrea counted the seconds and her mom illustrated their drive, she felt something different than with the apartment.

Her chest hurt and her body shook. She saw the faded green Ford slow on the long road before turning. The engine rattled as they parked but Andrea didn't move. Even when Ellie pushed open the door and Maggie rushed ahead, Andrea stayed put. It was hate. Andrea felt hatred. Hate was this forced stillness because Charlotte had stolen her options.

“Andrea, what’s going on? Are you hurt?” Maggie fell on the bench beside Andrea and touched her arm, her cheek, pushed her hair behind her ear. Ellie reached them a few seconds later but stayed stood a few inches away. She wiped her phone on her shirt and watched Andrea.

“How long have you been here?” Ellie asked. Andrea shook her head as Maggie’s arms tightened around her shoulders. Fresh tears fell over her cheeks as Andrea stuttered something about Charlotte being her friend.

“Did Charlotte say something? Did you get in a fight?” Maggie’s voice was calm as she ran through possible scenarios evenly, waiting for Andrea’s confirmation.

Waves of sorry crashed through Andrea’s chest and she stuttered through her explanations. Her tongue felt thick and the words fell from her mouth half-formed. She didn’t want to tell their mom. Andrea picked a long, jagged splinter from the wood table, bending it backward until it snapped. The uneven table rocked as Ellie slid on the opposite bench. Maggie tried removing Andrea’s sketchbook from her grasp but Andrea recoiled and drew the book closer.

“It’s okay.” Maggie whispered. “I’m just moving it out of the way.” Andrea released the book and Maggie pulled Andrea closer.

Her mom’s rocking felt subtle enough that Andrea wasn’t sure if she moved with purpose or from the breeze. Her back hurt and when she straightened she saw Ellie frowning and typing something on her phone.

"Busy?" Andrea gritted her teeth.

"No. I'm sorry. Theresa was just..."

"We can go."

"But you—" Ellie widened her eyes at Maggie. A dog ran by and Andrea followed his body as he rushed through the shallow lake. The lake wasn't wide but a steep hill blocked the view of the neighborhood nestled behind. Small patches of dandelions sprouted over the grass but the breeze was tinged with an unmistakable fish smell.

"Everyone is staring at me. I want to leave."

Maggie rubbed Andrea's shoulder. "Don't worry about them. We don't have to leave yet if you don't want to."

"I think Charlotte killed Carl."

No one said anything but Maggie's hand tightened on her shoulder. Andrea didn't know what came next, if she should say anything or vouch for herself.

"You...think?" Ellie finally said.

"She told me she did."

"She *told* you?"

"Ellie." Maggie scratched a bitten down nail over the table, drawing lines back and forth, back and forth in the wood. "But why would she do that?"

"I don't know, because she's a psycho." Andrea expected her mom to defend Charlotte and snap them into a logical reality. Maggie could stop time and dig out answers and solutions. But Charlotte wasn't there and Ellie hovered ghost-like on the edge, unreachable.

"What do you mean by...killed? Did she do something specific?"

"Do you not believe me? She told me right there in the car when she took me to Sam's."

"No. No, sweetheart, I do believe you. I'm just trying to put the pieces together. You were at Sam's?"

"No. I never went to Sam's because I don't want my friend knowing my sister is an insane person and *killed my snake*." Her throat ached and her eyes burned. Andrea felt caught in a net and the more she thrashed the more she tangled herself between the ropes. She looked at Ellie, the muscles in her jaw visible.

"Say something!" Andrea yelled and Ellie jumped. "Say something, please! Don't just sit there and stare at me like I'm the one who did something wrong."

"Andrea, calm down."

"No you need to stop being such a fucking *zombie* all the time."

"That's enough." Maggie snapped and got up from the table. From where Andrea sat her mom towered over her and the unfamiliar angle made the world spin. Maggie offered both hands and helped pull Andrea up.

As Maggie kept her arm around Andrea as she guided them back to the car. Andrea pretended she couldn't feel her mom shaking.

No one spoke as they drove away from the park. Andrea leaned on the window and watched the road curve around the land, the park's play structures revolving as the car drove around the looping road. The lake glittered between the trees.

"It's really nice out today." Ellie whispered before silence fell again.

The park was in a valley and Andrea felt her gaze slope down the hill as they drove past. A grey sidewalk rushed into view, replacing the grass and pulling away as the road widened. Cars surrounded them and Andrea felt tossed around like a doll. The car jerked and her chin smacked against the door's rubbery ledge. Familiar chain restaurants rolled by, their bright and cartoonish signs smudged by the dirty window.

"I don't want to go home." Andrea said.

Maggie exchanged a look with Ellie. "Are you sure? I can stay with you. I'll give Ellie the car and-"

"No." Andrea thought of her bedroom walls and the floor covered in their stuff, Charlotte's stuff. She couldn't figure out how to explain the way their room changed when something was wrong. How the walls felt cold if Ellie was sick or if Andrea failed test and the air felt thick. She didn't want to find out what it would be like now.

“I want to go with you.” Andrea insisted. She had never seen Theresa’s house before and she wanted something new and distracting. A place Charlotte never touched. Andrea twisted her hands when Maggie had Ellie pull over in a pharmacy parking lot. The keys jingled in the ignition but Ellie left the car running.

“I think you’d feel better if you laid down, Andrea.” Maggie reached behind and smoothed Andrea’s hand.

Ellie remained silent and faced forward, but Andrea caught her glance in the rearview mirror. She hadn’t noticed before how the mirror cut a face like an inverted mask, focusing on her sister’s eyes and the way they flatlined. A weak flicker rippled over their blueness and Andrea wondered then if Ellie was surprised.

Maggie relented and agreed they could all go together. Ellie’s eyes tore away from the mirror.

Charlotte

Charlotte reached the end of eighty-fourth street where the road forked into the highway. Her face hurt and she pressed her mouth in a firm line so she didn't feel her dry skin move. She was exhausted and sat through two rounds of the stoplight before a pick-up pulled up behind her. She yanked the car in the truck stop parking lot beside her.

She had been making this drive ever since she told Andrea about Carl. Charlotte would reach this intersection, imagining the car turning and driving out of Lincoln, but she never could. She didn't think of it as running away, more like giving herself space or giving people space from her. Her dad expected her anyway, he wouldn't care if she was a little early. But she always turned around, floating between Joy's and her home before feeling the panic surge again and she found herself back at the truck stop.

Men's indecipherable voices rumbled outside her window, broken up with laughter. Her dad's voice wasn't as deep. It had a higher, taunting tilt that always bothered Charlotte and her sisters because it made it difficult to tell if he was being serious or not. Charlotte concentrated on the men's conversation, something about baseball, but once she was sure she got Andrea out of her mind, The Goldenrod appeared.

It had been less than a week, but the whole thing felt less and less real. Charlotte could remember what she had done logically, but outside the raw skin over her thumb

and her dirty black clothes hidden in the trunk, she wasn't sure she had really been there. She pressed her thumb and index finger together until she could feel the pulse. The skin wouldn't heal and looked shiny and smooth compared to her chapped skin. She wished she could call Theo and ask his advice, but she told herself she wasn't remembering him clearly.

Charlotte also wished she could call Joy. Charlotte had driven in front of her friend's house twice but couldn't bring herself to walk up. Charlotte ignored all Joy's texts, waiting for when she left with her family on vacation.

A boxy SUV pulled in the space beside Charlotte and a family fell out before the engine stopped. Charlotte's own car shook as they slammed their doors. Charlotte felt guilty she had left the bad car with her mom but she hadn't thought about the options. A part of her hoped that once her mom figured out she had left, Maggie would be grateful Charlotte was in the safer car.

She watched the family file into the gas station before taking out her phone.

"Charlotte!" Ellie cried.

"Where's mom?"

"She's...talking to Andrea. We're on our way to Theresa's party." Ellie broke off and Charlotte could hear her mom's voice in the back. When Ellie returned her voice was lower and hushed. "Andrea told us."

Sweat accumulated underneath Charlotte's legs and she scratched until red lines slashed over her skin.

"I'm...did she tell you that I'm really sorry?"

Ellie swore and voices jumped in and out. Maggie's voice filtered between the noise and Charlotte caught her neck craning so she could be closer.

"Are you okay?" Charlotte asked.

"The car won't start again. I need to..." there was a rattling then a rush of air.
"Listen, I need to go."

"I can come get you! Do you need a ride?"

"No! No. We're fine. We're right by Theresa's so we can push it around the corner. You shouldn't come."

The phone felt heavy in Charlotte's hand as it fell away from her ear. She wasn't sure when Ellie hung up but the screen was dark when Charlotte dropped the phone in her lap. She closed her eyes and imagined all the fights she had with Andrea in the past. She picked apart the patterns and tried determining how much Andrea might be hurting. Ellie would say there was a logical answer and that it was all a matter of habits and patterns and preparing for the next step.

But Charlotte was also distracted by The Goldenrod. When she thought about it Andrea's problems seemed so small.

She opened her eyes and saw a text from Ellie with Theresa's home address. *Just in case you're interested* was written below it.

Charlotte didn't consider if she was interested or not, only grateful that Ellie was giving her an opening. She read Ellie's tone in the text and registered the sarcastic snap in the words, but Charlotte could overlook that and pretend for a moment Ellie wanted her there. Maybe even Andrea had requested it so she could scream at Charlotte and tear her apart. But even that was a relief because that was a pattern, something Charlotte could prepare for.

Charlotte threw the Camry in reverse and sped out. As the city grew closer Charlotte admitted she need her family now more than ever.

Theresa's house was a standard, clean suburban house that differentiated itself from the identical houses with loud green shutters. Charlotte rubbed her eyes and kept her head in her hands. The house was nice. The shutters were nice. She pushed the door open and rushed across the street, not seeing the car driving toward her. She stopped and gasped as the car laid on their horn. She couldn't see the driver's face over the long hood and it wasn't until they honked again that Charlotte realized she hadn't moved. She felt the driver's eyes on her as she ran the rest of the way and leapt over the front steps. Her legs were shaking when Theresa answered the door.

"You look more and more like your mom every time I see you." Theresa gushed. She wore a bright pink, knee-length dress and dangling pineapple earrings.

“Um. Thank...you.”

Theresa ushered her in, placing her long fingers on Charlotte’s shoulder and directing her toward the back. But Charlotte paused in the living room.

“Do you collect clocks?”

Theresa laughed. “So you noticed. I didn’t really intend to. Clocks are so functional and boring but one day I suddenly started seeing all these beautiful, interesting ones and I just bought them. Without even thinking.” She went on and Charlotte got closer to a tiny one, it’s face egg shell white and covered in bulbous glass that exaggerated the numbers. It was wrapped in teal metal and stuck out further than the others. Charlotte touched it and it felt cold.

“That’s one of my favorites. Kat gave it to me and said she found it at a *vintage* store. Can you believe it? My own sister had a clock just like that and now it’s considered vintage.”

“I’ve never seen a clock like this.”

When Theresa didn’t respond Charlotte turned and saw Theresa’s looking through the kitchen, her smile frozen. She popped her hip and pulled the thin gold chain around her neck.

“What?” Charlotte regretted her abruptness and straightened. “Where’s my mom?”

“They’re in the back. Helping put together kabobs.”

Charlotte followed Theresa but tried staying hidden behind her body as they entered the kitchen until Theresa swerved right and opened the fridge. Exposed in the glass door, Charlotte watched her mom accept a half-filled skewer from Andrea. In the distance Ellie followed what must have been Jane around the yard's edge.

"Can you carry these, dear?" Theresa thrust two large bowls in Charlotte's arms and reached around her, sliding open the door. She waited while Charlotte took tentative steps forward. The soft rattle of the skewers stopped and Theresa's fast directions filled the space.

"Theresa, where's Charlie?" Maggie asked. Charlotte wished her mom would cross the patio and stand by her, but her mom stayed with Andrea and strung together another kabob.

"Oh he'll be here." They waited for more details but Theresa only smoothed out the folds in the tablecloth and straightened a chair. Charlotte glanced at her mom, who raised her eyebrows and shrugged without any follow up.

The afternoon faded into the early evening and humidity collected throughout the yard. Theresa kept insisting what a great day it was for a barbeque but Charlotte felt like she was swimming through the air. She watched Ellie give Jane sippy cup and the child tipped it back before returning it to Ellie. Charlotte waded through the grass, feeling stupid for coming. She couldn't read Ellie's face and was surprised when a smile spread over it as she accepted the cup from Jane.

"You like this job?" Charlotte twisted a paper napkin.

Ellie fanned her cheeks. "Enough. I'll miss Jane when I leave."

"You're leaving?"

"I can't stay forever. And didn't mom tell you? I had an interview at Nebraska Game and Parks."

Jane wrapped her sticky hands around Charlotte's leg. The manicured grass came up past the child's ankle's and Charlotte thought she looked like she was sinking. Charlotte had been so frustrated when Ellie moved back but now it sounded like she could leave. Charlotte wasn't sure if she was sad because of her sister's leaving, or because she hadn't been around to hear.

"That's great." Charlotte whispered.

Ellie picked up Jane, who fell easily in the dent between Ellie's neck and shoulder. Charlotte wanted to call her a baby but she wasn't sure if that's what she was. Jane looked like a mix of old and young, her dark eyes crowded by chubby cheeks. Ellie said Jane needed a nap before the party and that people would arrive soon.

"Is there anything else I can do to help?"

"I'm sure Theresa has something for someone to do."

Charlotte watched Ellie stride across the yard and saw how tan her arms had gotten and the way they stood out from under her blue dress. Her hair was pinned back with four bobby pins and she moved with an ease different from the way she moved at home. At home Ellie hesitated and jumped with someone came around the corner too

fast. But here Ellie walked in a straight line, each motion connected to the next. Jane was calm in her arms.

Charlotte wasn't sure why Ellie told her Theresa's address. Andrea had vanished and Maggie was unreadable. Charlotte realized Ellie hadn't asked her to come, she had just given Charlotte some information and waited for her to make the decision. Now Charlotte worried she had made the wrong one or if there was an option she couldn't see.

Ellie

Ellie watched Charlotte through the kitchen window over the sink. Charlotte picked up a large branch and swung it around before tossing it over the back fence. It skittered across the bike path.

The patio looked nice. They had unfolded the red umbrella over the glass-top table and arranged bright colored bowls and trays in designated courses, ready for the chips and cookies and vibrant utensils Theresa picked up at the craft store that morning. Andrea was quiet but helpful, accepting Theresa's tasks with a stiff smile. Theresa fluttered through the house, barely landing before springing back in. It was infectious at first, but Ellie sensed a nervous energy left in her wake. As she washed Jane's dirty hands she could feel Theresa hovering behind her.

"Your daughter is like...a ray of sunshine in my house." Theresa gushed. "And Janie just loves her. I don't know what I'd do without Ellie."

Near the breakfast bar, Maggie laughed and looked pleased, but Ellie blushed. She appreciated Theresa's kindness but her words were tainted by a certain disingenuousness. Ellie thought for a second about puncturing the syrupy sweetness of Theresa's compliment with a reminder of the hospital, like a level. Ellie snapped a black hair tie around her wrist.

Andrea entered and fell in one of the chairs, staring at her hands. Maggie filled a glass with water and offered it across the table.

“Are you okay, dear?” Theresa asked. “I have some pain killers in the bathroom if you need. I always get headaches right before a party. It’s all so stressful and overwhelming.”

“No. I’m fine. Thank you.”

Maggie and Theresa exchanged glances. Theresa counted the chairs again, wondering aloud if they needed more. She paused. “Charlotte seems a lot like Laurie. She and Kat were so similar growing up until one day,” Theresa snapped her fingers, “a switch flipped and it was like they weren’t even twins anymore.”

Ellie pulled a pile of paper napkins closer, folding each one in half and placing them in a cup so they fanned out. Andrea’s face crumpled and she claimed she need the bathroom, standing so fast her chair rattled over the tile. Maggie dragged her finger over the abandoned water glass’ condensation.

“We think Charlotte killed Andrea’s pet snake.” Maggie watched the hall and kept her voice low. Ellie pressed down another crease.

Theresa sucked in a breath. “She did? How? I mean, I’m terrified of snakes but I would never...”

“I don’t know. It’s all a little...fresh at the moment.”

Ellie tried finding Charlotte again, but she'd walked beyond the limits of the window. From where Ellie stood she could only see a section of the fence and the spot where the bike path disappeared in the thin forest. She had taken Jane on walks along that path and often had to explain that no, Jane was not her daughter. The path was beautiful. The leaves cast mosaic shadows over the concrete and their hypnotic movements always made Jane drift off.

"If one of my girls did that it would be no car for a year. Or no phone."

"The car thing...is complicated. And Charlotte needs her phone. I need her to have a phone."

"Do you know why she did that?"

Maggie sighed and shook her head. Ellie twisted a pink napkin around her finger. The whole party was very girly, which Ellie liked well enough but as she folded napkins and unpackaged neon plates she wished she had gone shopping with Theresa so mediate. Theresa's traditional femininity was fun and so different from her own home, but today it felt insistent. Most of Theresa's style was so natural and smooth, so Ellie assumed she knew what she was doing, but she felt anxious waiting for people to arrive and break up the space.

"When Andrea told me...I wasn't surprised." Maggie smoothed down her hair and locked eyes with Ellie. The napkin tore in Ellie's hands. "Upset, yes. Worried about Andrea. Worried about Charlotte. But...not surprised."

Charlotte came in view then, pausing near the window's bottom left corner. Ellie's mouth felt dry as she watched her younger sister collapse on the grass with her arms outstretched. Then she covered her face with her palms.

Guests arrived with their contributions, mostly salads, and crowded the tables with their flower-patterned casserole dishes and tin foil. Theresa had Ellie and Andrea restock the empty plates and coolers while she pulled Maggie with her, passing out plates and refilling wine glasses.

"Set it anywhere." A woman handed Ellie a steel bowl before gushing at Jane in her father's arms. Charlie showed up five minutes before the first guest did, which Ellie wasn't sure was strategic or stupid on his part. Theresa only raised an eyebrow when he walked in. Ellie looked at the table holding all the side dishes.

"What's that?" Andrea pointed at the bowl.

"A Midwest salad."

Andrea giggled and told her the lid should stay on, no one wanted warm mayonnaise.

"It shouldn't be outside at all."

"What a dumb thing to bring to an outdoor barbeque."

Ellie shrugged and stuffed it in one of the coolers while Charlie stood beside her with Jane tucked under his chin. Ellie had seen him in pictures and once in passing when

she left late in the evening. But the sky purpled around his face so she couldn't get a good look at him. He had asked Ellie twice already if she knew where a lighter was for the tiki torches. He had a soft voice and was shorter than most men Ellie knew, although her measuring stick was Noah, who was over six feet.

"The bugs are already starting to come out." He guarded Jane's head with his hand. Ellie had a hard time imagining him fathering Jane. He was too pliable, his smile watery like he was waiting for someone else's reaction so he could follow suit.

He waved at a couple, shaking the man's hand when they approached. The sun's rays shifted so the heat centralized on the concrete patio. Smells from the barbeque wafted around them and Ellie slowed, held in place by the haze.

"Ellie! Eat something!" Theresa called from across the lawn before gesturing toward the huge tree in front of her. Ellie knew she was voicing her concerns about the roots tearing up her yard.

"She said she wanted to tear it down. But I think it's pretty." Andrea said.

"Don't get her started."

Andrea stayed close as Ellie filled a plate. They nodded while Charlie lamented the tomato crop this year.

"I love tomatoes, but every time I go to the store they look so sad." He cupped his hand as if holding a large tomato. "You need substance, you know?"

“Sure. Yeah.” Ellie eyed Andrea’s almost empty plate. “I love tomatoes on my sandwiches.”

Charlie shook his head and unwrapped a plate of un-grilled kabobs. “What you really need to try are thick slices of tomatoes with *real* mozzarella. Not that fake stuff. But real stuff you have to slice. Have you have had that?”

“I haven’t.”

“Do it as soon as you can. The organic grocer on O Street has the best mozzarella I’ve found so far. But nothing beats the stuff we had in Italy.” He waved his tongs in the air. Andrea snorted but Ellie forced herself to promise. If he kissed his fingers to his lip though, she’d have to run.

Ellie stretched out in a lawn chair, kicked off her sandals, and could still hear Charlie’s enthusiasm as she dug her feet through the cool grass. Andrea pulled a chair across from her and they picked at their food.

“Where’s Charlotte?” Ellie regretted telling Charlotte Theresa’s address, but she hadn’t thought her sister would really come. At the time, it seemed important that everyone stay together, especially since Charlotte had all but disappeared the last few days.

Andrea snapped a celery stick in half. “Who cares? Why did she even come? She’s making everything awkward.”

“Maybe she feels bad.”

“God. That’s the bare minimum. She killed Carl.”

“I know but...” Ellie felt like she was digging herself into a hole. She didn’t want Andrea mad at her too by thinking she was siding with Charlotte.

Jane squealed and Ellie whipped around, her heart thudding until she found Jane bouncing in someone’s arms. Her stomach puffed out from under her t-shirt covered in pineapples. She had matching sunglasses too but they were missing.

“So are you going to ignore her forever?”

“Sure. Sounds good to me.”

“Come on, Andrea.”

Andrea folded the edges of her plate. She looked like she might cry and Ellie sighed, tearing her bread roll in small chunks.

“I’m sorry.” Ellie said. “It sucks. All of it.”

Andrea ripped her plate and a carrot fell on the ground.

“You don’t have to stay. You can take mom’s car and go home.”

A breeze picked up and rippled the crinkly paper tablecloth behind them. A man came by and opened the cooler, shifting the ice in search of a beer. Voices smoothed out around them and a thin layer of smoke floated through the air.

“There’s wine inside?” Andrea asked.

“Yeah.”

She stood and straightened her black t-shirt. "Might as well stay for that then."

The yard was filled with people and campy, upbeat music from Theresa's boom box. Charlie laughed when Theresa brought it out but the other guests loved it, circling around and jumping with shock as memories rushed over them. Jane followed Charlie around while Theresa encouraged Ellie in the surrounding conversations. Ellie waited for someone to pass their child off with her. She thought she would greet the kids at the front door and take them downstairs, but instead the parents kept them and studied Ellie. Ellie felt like she was being interviewed.

"I'm hoping for a job at Nebraska Game and Parks." Ellie said when someone asked what she did. "The Youth Programs Coordinator."

"Being around Jane has made you fall in love with kids, hasn't it?" a woman fawned, her face too close.

"I think it's more organizing than interacting with the kids. But, yeah. Jane is sweet."

A man with a beard approached and placed his hand on the woman's lower back. Ellie scratched her chin and wondered how he could stand the heat while the woman repeated what Ellie told her.

"So you like the outdoors?"

"I like a paycheck." Ellie joked but the man's attention was pulled over her shoulder. He nodded and Ellie realized his wife had disappeared. Ellie wasn't sure what she had expected from this party, but she didn't think she'd have to be on her toes so much. She took a deep breath and looked around at the other couples, some tan but not all. They stayed confined to the concrete square, careful not to tip over the edge into the grass.

She heard Theresa before she saw her, her voice soaring over the group. "Ellie! Do you mind taking the kids downstairs?"

"Of course! Yes, no problem." The air conditioning pushed through her and Ellie shivered, taking in the quiet house. She herded Jane and two others toward the basement, passing Maggie on the way. She placed her hand on Ellie's shoulder and whispered.

"How are your sisters?"

"Fine I guess. Staying away from each other."

Charlotte had more or less disappeared. At one point Ellie had checked if both their cars were still parked out front, and they were. Charlotte was around there somewhere, but Ellie couldn't think of where while Jane pulled her hair and a smaller boy, she heard his name was Hank, insisted he take the stairs himself.

The kids seemed subdued and played together on the floor. Jane sat against the sofa and watched the others stack blocks and stab the keys on a small, plastic piano,

clapping with the noise. Ellie estimated about twenty minutes before she could distract them with a movie and settled into the recliner, watching them play.

Above, guests opened and closed the back door. Their movements thumped over her head and she waved whenever someone came down for the spare bathroom. She didn't know how big Theresa planned for the party, but Ellie kept hearing drawers open and bottles clink. At one point a group of women laughed, the clustered mix of sounds growing and shrinking and Ellie imagined their foreheads close together.

A child screamed and ripped Ellie's attention away from the party and toward the little girl who fell on her backside. The girl, Bella, sat silent and in shock, her small mouth hanging open. Ellie gripped the recliner while she stared at the girl. Don't cry, Ellie thought until she rolled over and pushed herself up, breaking their connected gaze. She waddled to the boy playing with a train, drew her hand back, and hit him hard across the back of his head. The boy didn't wait before he started screaming.

"You're not very good at this."

Ellie saw Charlotte's black converse before she moved up her sister's pale legs and saw her hunched by the room's entry. Hank strained in Ellie's grasp. "I don't usually have three kids running around. And is that a joke? You really think you can be making jokes right now?"

"Sorry. I was just trying to--"

"Well don't."

Charlotte folded herself against the wall and scowled. "You're the one who asked me to come." Jane smiled at Charlotte and Charlotte sort of smiled back. \Her voice fell off the edges of her sentences and her posture arched so much Ellie thought she might be sick. Ellie sat back on her heels and waited until Hank calmed before releasing him and asking Charlotte if she could help.

"What do I do?"

"Just make sure they don't kill each other."

Charlotte inched forward and sat on the floor near Bella. The little girl had thick, round curls springing from her skull, held down by a plastic butterfly beret. Ellie stifled her laugh as Bella stared with her wide, blue-eyed gaze and pointed to Charlotte's own bare head. Ellie released Hank and retrieved Jane from the couch.

The basement had less personality than upstairs. The walls were off-white, and the furniture was worn out leather and covered with homemade knitted throw blankets in varying shades of blue. It was calming in a way, but it also struck Ellie as the room Theresa kept the things she didn't know what to do with, like their garage.

The short rug imprinted itself on Ellie's leg and she smoothed the dents over her skin. Charlotte accepted Bella's hand, who led her over to the small collection of stuffed animals.

Ellie was thinking of finding a movie when Andrea appeared in the same spot Charlotte had been, holding a red cup. She didn't seem drunk though, just uneven. Like the sight of Charlotte conflicted with her relaxed state.

"Leave. I want to hang out with Ellie without you." she commanded Charlotte.

Ellie glanced at Hank, who had already proven himself more sensitive than the other two and worried he'd pick up on Andrea's instability. "How much have you had to drink, Andrea?"

"Calm down. I'm fine."

"It's probably more fun upstairs. The babies keep screaming at each other down here."

"Upstairs is boring. All the adults are boring. Do you not want me here?"

"No, I like having you around but--"

Andrea fell into the recliner angled in the corner and glared at Charlotte, who ducked her head and accepted a stuffed lion from Bella. Jane crawled over the floor and began pulling magazines from their neat pile.

"So how'd you do it?" Andrea muttered.

"Andrea, come on. Not here."

"No, Ellie. I should know. I should know how my baby sister went about killing my snake. Carl. He had a name, you know." Her voice overwhelmed her and she sunk

deeper in the cushions the louder she became. Ellie smoothed her hand over Hank's back who seemed nervous, his brown eyes wide under his too long hair. Ellie pulled him closer, thinking he must not have had a haircut before. He nestled in her arms and turned a wooden block around in his hands.

"I didn't kill him." Charlotte answered, but the sentence ended like a question.

"Bullshit."

"Andrea!" Ellie stood and grabbed her sister's arm, not thinking any further than wanting her away from the kids. But Andrea resisted, said sorry, claimed it slipped out. Hank followed and Ellie could feel his small hand grip her calf.

"You need to leave. Now. Go upstairs."

"I knew you would take her side!" Andrea pushed too hard and the recliner rocked forward. Red wine splashed on the brown fabric. Ellie released Andrea's arm.

"Why'd you even invite her? She's never fun anymore anyway. She's all dark and broody and acts like everyone's offending her."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here!" Charlotte squeezed the stuffed lion as red flooded her cheeks. Hank whimpered but Ellie went for Jane, prying the torn magazine pages from her hands. Bella watched from the couch, her hand steadied on the cushions near Charlotte's leg. Ellie's major concern was keeping the kids as calm as possible and knew if one started, then so would the next. Or worse, Andrea and

Charlotte would get louder. They fought by piling their voices on top of each other until one crashed down.

Andrea

It didn't matter if Ellie was right or not about how much she'd had to drink, the sound of her older sister's condescension hit Andrea's chest and betrayal swirled with her anger. Ellie looked pathetic as she bent over to the skinny one, Hank, and soothed the whimpering boy. Ellie shot Andrea a look as if it was her fault the kids wouldn't listen. Andrea had spent the last few months feeling sorry for Ellie, hopeful that she would snap out of this delusional state and see the world with her old, sharp eyes.

But now Andrea knew for certain how wrong that was. If Ellie couldn't even side with her over Charlotte killing her snake, then she'd never see things the same way Andrea did. And because of that, she let Ellie handle the kids herself while she drank the free alcohol upstairs. Andrea crossed her legs and the recliner rocked back. Andrea's stomach dropped and she hoped she wouldn't spill again.

"So Charlotte," Andrea leaned over the chair's arm. "Did you plan it? Did you wait for me to leave for my final so you could do it while I was gone?"

Charlotte ignored her but redness crawled over her cheeks and filled her ears. Her sister's exposed face wasn't so bold now, it was naked. And Andrea thought she looked silly, like Charlotte had forgotten to put on hair.

“You might as well tell me. He’s already dead anyway. You won. So you might as well tell me your strategy.”

“I didn’t have a strategy.”

“You always have a strategy.”

Charlotte rotated her head toward Andrea. Charlotte had weird eyes, usually muted and cloudy so she often looked dazed. But the basement’s soft yellow light came from a single lamp in the corner and cast light in uneven angles, crossing through Charlotte’s greyness so they cut like granite. Andrea wavered. She worried Charlotte knew that she did.

“Why don’t you believe me?”

Because Andrea was tired of things being so complicated and having a black-and-white answer meant she could have a black-and-white response. At the core, Charlotte meant to hurt Andrea by harming something she loved. Andrea’s mouth felt coated in a thin film so her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Ellie stood between them with her arms crossed by not saying anything, Jane playing at her feet. Had she planned this? Andrea smirked.

“Good job, Elinor.” Andrea slid off the chair.

Charlotte muttered something.

“*What* did you say?”

“Charlotte...” Ellie pleaded.

"I said you sound like Dad!" Charlotte shoved the stuffed lion in the little girl's arms. "He always thinks everyone is out to get him. It's all a game. But people don't care about you *that* much."

"You're the one that hated Carl. You told me that you didn't want him there. You planned-"

"I don't hate Carl. I said I was sorry but now you just want to be mean."

"Stop it!" Andrea..." Ellie held out her hands.

"It's not always so simple, Charlotte. You don't always have to teach a goddamn lesson all the time."

"Andrea!" Ellie grabbed Andrea's arm and pulled but Andrea shook her off. Charlotte leaned over the couch's edge, her breathing ragged. "Go upstairs. You can't swear in front of the kids."

Andrea's lip curled but she ripped her arm from Ellie and left. Halfway up the stairs she paused to control her own tears. Her cheeks hurt and she knew she needed water, but the thought that she might have scared Jane and the others made her feel worse. Charlotte wouldn't listen. Andrea felt like she was screaming the answer in her sister's face but Charlotte had already decided to tune her out.

The kitchen burst with light and Andrea gripped the edge of the counter, facing away from the glare reflected off the kitchen tile. The room was empty and quiet. The bodies outside moved together in a muted wave beyond the glass.

She found the wine bottle. The red liquid sloshed through the green glass when Andrea placed her hand on it. She tilted it forward and back, watching her own reflection until let the bottle rattle on the countertop. She bent the lip of her cup so the edges snapped. All the food had been taken outside and even though her stomach ached with hunger she didn't want to rejoin the party.

The backdoor slid open and Maggie poked her head into the kitchen. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair fell around her ears in lazy waves. She looked like a hippie.

"Andrea! Good. Can you bring out that roll of paper towels?" She smiled. "And Charlotte, there are some cassettes in the living room that Theresa's insisting on."

Andrea saw Charlotte in the corner of her eye but ignored her as she grabbed the roll and dug her nails into the plush paper. It had butterflies knitted in the fibers.

"Do you know what a cassette is?" Maggie teased.

Charlotte muttered *of course* and brushed past Andrea. Andrea felt her mom's hand on her back as she carefully stepped onto the patio.

It was late and darkness swallowed the yard. Tiki torches lined the concrete and provided some illumination but the light dotted the edges and guests' faces dipped in and out of the limited, buttery light. Women laughed and men clapped each other on the back, moves that reminded Andrea so much of parties she attended with her friends that for a moment she couldn't remember where she was. Theresa's pink dress swirled

around her knees as she touched one man's chest and laughed. Andrea didn't see Charlie.

When a woman behind Andrea mentioned the fires, she whipped around, feeling a sudden surge of protectiveness. Maggie's smile wavered.

"I feel terrified every time I leave my house." she said.

"We're fine. It's all happening downtown anyway." the man near Theresa answered. "Besides, you know how the media blows things out of proportion."

Andrea snorted. "I don't think I'd call *The Journal Star* reliable media."

Silence lingered until Theresa set her cup down and waved her hands in the air, clearing away the awkwardness. "Well the important thing is that we have each other. I don't know about you but I feel safer having you all here." She clasped her hands. "Charlie, Jane, and I pray for all of you and the people who did those things every day."

The others nodded. They offered validation and gently touched Theresa's elbow. A voice on the far side said they caved and started building a taller fence around their backyard.

"I can't see the park anymore, but it makes me feel better."

The backdoor slammed shut and everyone jumped. Nervous laughter sprinkled through the group when they saw Charlotte standing on the top step, a small pile of plastic cases in her hands. She looked like an outline with the kitchen light behind her.

"Where should I put these?" she asked.

Theresa directed Charlotte toward a cleared table with the boom box. Everything else had been removed on the ground and held in place with chairs and rocks. “You guys all have me feel so nostalgic today. Charlotte, play that *Lemonheads* one could you please?”

“Theresa, I heard your nanny has a new job. What are you going to do about Jane?” Someone asked.

“It’s an interview. And we’ll see. I don’t want to think about it just yet.”

“But we’re sure she’ll get it.” Maggie insisted. Theresa nodded.

“Of course. Yes. We love Ellie so much and, she knows this, I don’t trust those in-home babysitters anymore. But the good daycares are all downtown and frankly-” she stopped. Silence spread over the group as they waited. Heat wafted off her mother’s skin. “I am so scared that something is going to happen if I leave Jane. Like that poor family behind The Goldenrod?”

Others muttered their agreement. The darkness behind Theresa moved, unspecified lines morphing through the void until Andrea zeroed in and saw it was only the branches of a tree in the neighbor’s yard.

Music exploded from the boom box and people ducked as the sound flew at their heads. Andrea thought she shrieked but couldn’t hear her own voice. The muscles in her jaw squeezed and her head wracked with the vibrations.

“Charlotte!” Maggie yelled. A dog barked and lights flicked on in nearby houses. Charlotte’s hand laid heavily on the dial and all the color drained from her face. Her body bent in a silver sliver through the dark.

Andrea rushed over and turned the volume down. Charlotte swayed when Andrea shoved her to the side and her face slacked. The sound disappeared and everyone blinked and pulled closer together in shocked silence. Theresa giggled and the others’ voices filled the empty space.

“Did you think that was funny?” Andrea hissed.

Charlotte gripped the end of the plastic table cloth and Andrea saw there were long, shredded lines where Charlotte must have dragged her nails through the fabric. Andrea grabbed her sister’s arm but Charlotte yanked it back, her eyes wide with alarm and her other hand flew up to guard herself.

“God, I’m not going to hit you.”

“What happened to the family?”

Andrea’s vision tilted. “What family?”

“The one...the one behind The Goldenrod?”

It happened all at once. The world tilted and Andrea leaned on the table and felt her body turn over her wrist. She’d been drunk before but it had always appeared in increments. Her friends could mark each one and tell her the next day that she’d gotten to her confessional stage or her crying stage. Andrea placed her other hand on the table

and felt the cloth move under her palms. She tried counting how many glasses of wine she'd had but it made her stomach turn.

Andrea backed away as Charlotte reached out for her again. Her foot hit the table and the leg scratched over the concrete.

"Don't touch me."

"Andrea...please can you answer my question?"

The guests blurred together and their laughter increased, but the music still raged in Andrea's head. Andrea looked between the bodies and willed them to stay put but they morphed in and out of each other.

"I'm going inside. Don't follow me." The words felt thick and heavy in her mouth and when she felt Charlotte trailing after her she wasn't convinced she had really said them.

"Andrea..."

"Shut up, Charlotte. Leave me alone."

In the kitchen Andrea felt confronted by the red gingham tablecloth and matching cookie jars and magnets from twenty-eight of the fifty states.

"Theresa's house is so fucking *cute*. Isn't it? Charming." She picked up a salt shaker shaped like a cow. She felt Charlotte's breath near her cheek. Andrea whipped around and saw her sister's large, grey eyes as perfect circles. Her head blocked the backdoor and the yellow kitchen light dripped over her skin.

“What happened?” Charlotte’s voice cracked. Her face did too. A fault line ran through her expression and tore her features apart. Andrea almost laughed, Charlotte had them all convinced she was an adult. But here, standing in front of Andrea, was something in between.

Andrea focused on the tip of Charlotte’s nose. “I don’t know. A family’s house caught fire I guess.” Charlotte’s face shifted and Andrea realized how harsh she sounded. She wasn’t mad at the family. She gripped the kitchen chair. “I think they had paint cans or something sitting outside. Whatever it was those houses are so flimsy, you know? So it just-” She imitated the flames with her free hand, waving her fingers in the air.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“You always think I’m so stupid, but I’m not.” Andrea tightened her words into their normal roundness. Even drunk, the idea of acting drunk in front of Charlotte embarrassed her. “Not that it takes a genius to see this whole town is falling apart. Fire after fire after death after protest. People almost have something to talk about other than football.”

Threads from Charlotte’s ratty Converse frayed over the clean tile floor and reminded Andrea of spiders. When she looked up, her sister’s face was skeletal. Her cheeks looked concave and they felt so the only thing holding her up were the bones underneath. Exhaustion flooded Andrea’s head, the weight of which pulled her neck back.

“Who died?” Her voice splintered.

Charlotte smelled like sweat but when Andrea stepped back Charlotte reached out, her fingertips brushing Andrea’s forearm. Rage snapped Andrea in half.

“Don’t you fucking touch me.” Andrea’s voice was low, undeterred by Charlotte’s shaking. From the side Andrea saw Ellie approach with Jane on her shoulder, but slowed when she saw Andrea and Charlotte. Andrea wanted to insist she hadn’t been the one to make Charlotte cry, she just started out of nowhere. Ellie cradled Jane’s head in her hand, her fingers stretched over the child’s smooth hair and guarding her from the noise around her. Charlotte lunged at Ellie, her own hands outstretched.

“Ellie,” Charlotte sobbed. “Who died?”

“I need to put Jane to bed.” But Ellie stayed in the kitchen, looking between the two of them until Andrea felt another wave of nausea rush through her. She caught Charlotte’s outstretched hand and held it. Andrea saw Ellie’s thumb smooth over Charlotte’s skin.

Everything around her felt slippery and the lights above her popped in and out of her vision. Charlotte’s sobs were yet another layer and Andrea wanted her to stop, just stop, for a second so that everything wasn’t piling on her so fast.

“I didn’t drink that much.” she tried. If she could explain to Ellie the way everything felt stacked inside her right now: her sister’s betrayal, their mother’s stress, how hot and stifling their house was. Their dad and how much she was tired of telling

him no. Claire and Lydia and even Sam with her sparkly, bouncy personality. How Ellie was unrecognizable and every time Andrea tired accepting that, she felt like screaming. Theresa's party should have been a relief but it was overwhelming.

Ellie released Charlotte and wrapped her arm around Andrea's shoulders, guiding her down the hall. Andrea's heart sped up and heat pricked her cheeks. She should feel protected by Ellie now, but this wasn't Ellie. Ellie was gone. Andrea should stop hoping her older sister would do something other than this.

The moment she spotted the bathroom, Andrea released herself from Ellie's embrace and shut the door behind her.

Charlotte

Charlotte couldn't stand on her own. Her legs shook. Charlotte couldn't see one face from another in the backyard, the darkness crawling up their bodies and faces blurred. The darkness crawled up bodies and everyone moved too fast. Andrea was a watery mess but Charlotte clutched Ellie's hand even when she pulled back. Charlotte begged but Jane blocked Ellie's face.

When Ellie guided Andrea down the hall, Charlotte tried searching for The Goldenrod fire on her phone. She couldn't remember why she had decided to keep herself from what had happened. She tried her passcode again and again but her fingers shook so hard she messed the code up until she locked herself out. She dropped her phone on the table but it slid off and crashed on the chair tucked neatly underneath. She threw herself at the table and searched for a newspaper. This looked like the room Theresa would read the newspaper, Charlotte thought. The plastic tablecloth, the windows overlooking the yard, the nearby coffee pot. Charlotte pressed her palms against her cheeks, holding herself in place.

She closed her eyes but all she saw was The Goldenrod overtaken by the flames. Smoke filled the sky in her eyes and the flames were high and sickly yellow. It looked alien and the flames' white center pulled her forward. But she hadn't actually seen it, she'd only heard about the fire from everyone else, tasted the smoke filtering through

the air felt Lincoln strain against itself. She pressed her palms against her temples and took three deep breaths. When she opened her eyes, her vision was spotted and her head spun even though she hadn't had anything to drink. Ellie cooed in the distance and water ran in the bathroom as Charlotte raced to the living room and ripped throw pillows from their corners. She rifled through the few magazines filed carefully in a rack that look like bamboo. The backyard door opened and guests cheered and yelled their goodbyes to someone.

Charlotte pressed herself against the wall and slid on the floor. The couple didn't see her as car keys rattled and the woman told her husband something about not waking the kids when they got home.

"We should have brought them here." The husband sighed. "Probably cheaper."

"I don't trust anyone to watch more than two little kids at a time. I don't know this girl. Is she certified to-?" her voice was cut off by the front door slam.

Cold sweat formed between her skin and the wall. Charlotte studied her hands, turning her wrists so the blue veins twisted under her skin. Her thumb had healed but she thought she could see the injury's vague outline or the division between old and new skin. She wanted to splinter and let her fragments get carried away through the air.

If she were at home she could see her house in her memory and search it without moving. Even in the mess her mom had a system. Like, the bills were all in the kitchen. Charlotte had never seen the phone bill upstairs or even on the bookcase in the living room. But Charlotte didn't know Theresa's house and when she shut her eyes she

saw The Goldenrod again. She wished she had stayed so she could see with her own eyes what had happened instead of searching a strange woman's house for a newspaper she didn't trust with this story.

Charlotte clawed up the wall and followed the sounds of Ellie's level voice. In what must have been Jane's bedroom, she watched Ellie's back twist and curve from side to side as she rocked Jane. Ellie had gotten tan, and new muscles rose and fell under her dress' straps.

"Ellie?" Charlotte whispered. Her older sister's head whipped around and her hand flew to Jane's head. Her lips moved but Charlotte couldn't hear what she said. She was so tired suddenly, and leaned against the doorframe until Ellie laid Jane in her crib.

"What...where does Theresa keep her newspapers?" Charlotte asked once Ellie dragged her to the guest room across the hall.

"Her newspapers?"

Charlotte kept away from the window and fell on the bed. She gripped the edge of the mattress.

"She usually has them in the kitchen but she cleaned for the party." Ellie eyed Charlotte but with a wide gaze, her face open, and sat beside her. Energy racked her body so everything inside felt like it was pushing out from behind her skin and she was surprised when Ellie didn't flinch.

"Charlotte? What's wrong?"

“The...The Goldenrod. That restaurant that...it’s on Anderson and it had steaks and chocolate cake and a really weird looking bathroom with fake flowers even though all the other flowers in the restaurant were real.”

“Yes. Okay.”

“It burned, right? There was a fire and now it-”

“Charlotte. You’re sounding like everyone outside.” Ellie rubbed her face before pulling her hands through her hair. “We’re going to be okay. Yeah, it’s a little weird about what happened at the bookstore and now the restaurant but-” The bed sank under her weight and without realizing Charlotte leaned against her sister’s arm.

Ellie rubbed Charlotte’s back. “Did you know those people? The ones that died?”

Charlotte stared at a spot on the floor beneath the window where shadows broken and connected over the carpet. It looked like a hole but the sensation of knowing her hand would remain flat if she dug into it jarred Charlotte.

“It’s terrible. And it seems so preventable, you know? If only they hadn’t left their paint cans out or if only they’d smelled the fire beforehand.” Ellie’s words sounded like the space in the carpet, there and not there. “But those houses are so badly made. They’re shitty places to live and the fire moved so fast-”

Charlotte pulled a hangnail on her thumb until she felt it snap. She didn’t look, but when she laid her index finger over her thumb she could feel blood. Ellie’s voice roared between her ears like wind.

“What happened?” she didn’t know why she asked when Ellie had already said it in a way. When everyone outside had said it too with their higher fences. The fear was obvious in the melting pools of ice on the concrete, scent of cut grass lingering through the smoke from the grill. From the corner of her eye she saw Ellie’s head snap and knew her expression was twisted, confused, hadn’t she been listening?

“The Goldenrod Fire traveled over their yard, Charlotte. Their house burned.”

Charlotte pressed her index finger harder against her thumb, feeling the smallest pulse beneath her skin. She swayed before collapsing against Ellie. Her eyes burned as she kept herself from closing them, knowing the second she did she’d see The Goldenrod up in flames again. She didn’t realize she was crying until the window in front of her blurred and she tasted salt in her open mouth.

Ellie’s arms were hot. Charlotte knew her face was red and her eyes swollen. But she couldn’t hear Ellie even though her lips moved against her scalp. It was like Charlotte had fractured in two, a piece of her outside, still in the world, and the smaller part of her trapped behind her skin and her bones, roped behind nerves. The smaller part could see out her eyes, move her fingers, but remained detached.

“It’s okay, it’s all going to be okay.” Ellie murmured.

Words fell out of Charlotte’s mouth. They tasted thick and heavy, melted together. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

When Ellie didn't respond Charlotte assumed she hadn't heard her. She pulled her t-shirt away from her stomach, plastered to her skin with cold sweat, and shivered so violently she felt Ellie grip her shoulders harder.

Charlotte wasn't sure when she fell asleep, but she woke up with her legs curled against her stomach and laying across an unfamiliar bed. Charlotte hoped she was in her own bed but the stiff quilt told her differently.

Dusty moonlight filtered through the room, giving it an airy and bluish glow. Charlotte pulled herself up and saw the outlines of small mountains of stuff, Theresa's stuff, but not the objects themselves. In the small room the stacks leaned toward her. She blinked and the piles grew and lurched. She looked behind her and saw a vague lump under the quilt, the ends of Ellie's hair reaching across the pillow.

And then she remembered.

Charlotte rearranged herself and crawled under the quilt. The room was stuffy and the bed was warm, but Charlotte sunk as deep as she could, bunching the quilt in her fists and keeping them close to her mouth. She thought she would cry again but even though her chest felt tight and her throat sore, mostly she felt wrung out. She stared at the back of Ellie's head until her eyes closed again.

The loud crack happened over her head, out the window. Charlotte's eyes opened but she didn't move. The headboard rattled and Ellie's silhouette shot up beside the bed.

“Did you hear that?” Ellie whispered.

Charlotte kept her eyes on the digital clock’s green lines and the small spots on the nightstand glowing underneath it. It was four twenty-three.

“I thought it sounded like-”

And then they heard Theresa screaming.

Ellie stumbled and thumped against the wall, guiding herself out and leaving Charlotte trapped under the blanket. The walls flooded with noise as doors slammed opened and hushed voices solidified in urgency. Theresa screamed again. Charlotte tasted metal and covered her ears with her hands.

The mattress felt hard underneath her. She didn’t know if she should follow Ellie but she didn’t want to stay here. She curled up, placing her forehead on top of her knees and willed herself to fall back asleep. Chairs scraped over the kitchen floor and Charlotte realized she wasn’t shivering, but convulsing. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and tried steadying herself but she couldn’t.

Down the hall she heard Maggie’s voice but couldn’t hear what she said. Her sharp commands projected over Theresa’s wail. There was silence, running water, and Charlotte thought it was all over. Minutes or hours or seconds ticked by and Jane’s cries wavered and crashed. Sound shrunk and the movement slowed, but the air felt mobile. If Theresa’s house was at the center then soon gusts of something else would crash into them.

Her heart pounded in her throat and she swallowed.

“It’s okay.” She told herself. “It’s gone now.” She slid her feet off the mattress and let them dangle over the carpet, counting to three before standing. She kept her fingers on the bed for balance or security, she wasn’t sure, and the door grew in front of her as she approached it. She tucked her chin and placed one hand on the smooth wood and the other on the gold doorknob. Charlotte’s shadow reflected in its curves.

She turned the knob. And then the police sirens screamed.

Charlotte pulled back and stumbled toward the remaining bags left from the party, the ones her mom and sisters brought. She tore apart her mom’s purse until she found the car keys then grabbed her shoes fallen near the bed.

She wanted to send a message to show the Governor and all those men swarming the bookstore. To the ones that laughed at them during their protests. Everyone at St. Wenceslaus. Charlotte wanted them to know their control was shaky. They rested their futures on the old buildings filled with cheap and tacky furniture, the grotesque paintings, the photo ops and the rules that no one knew why they were followed, but insisted on blind acceptance. Keep things as they are, they said. But Charlotte wanted to prove how easily those things could burn.

She hadn’t wanted anyone killed.

Charlotte pushed the window open and fell outside. Streetlights glowed in puddles. The car door handle slipped out of Charlotte’s hand twice before she could

yank it open and get in. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel and a sob escaped her throat, sending her foot down on the gas so the car pitched forward. Charlotte's pushed out her shallow breath and the ragged air tore at her throat.

Her headlights ran over the ghosts of trees and cut through the fog. She kept touching her face but a layer of sweat blocked her fingers from feeling her own skin. As the trees shrunk and the spaces between buildings widened Charlotte wished she could remember if she'd seen anyone when she pulled out of Theresa's neighborhood.

At the stoplight turning onto the interstate, she slammed her hands against the steering wheel and screamed.

Ellie

Her first thought was one of surprise. The party couldn't still be happening, it was so late. Her second thought was she couldn't remember if Theresa had worn socks tonight. She guided herself along the wall, half asleep and cold in the dark night. Muffled voices fought on the other side on the wall as she drew closer. Halfway down the hall the kitchen light glowed and dripped over the living room carpet.

She stepped around the corner. Through the open back door she saw Theresa's legs, her thin blue shorts, and her translucent arms dangling at her side. She held her gun in her right hand, pointed toward the ground.

Maggie divided Theresa from Ellie, standing on the patio still covered in party remains. Plastic table cloths wavered in the air, a single cup caught beneath a chair's leg.

"Mo-" Ellie started and saw Theresa jump and turn. She was so pale and reminded Ellie of one of those dolls who collapsed when she pushed a button. Dark and light dipped over and through her, cutting her body into sections. Blue veins under her skin looked like threads, lacing her together. The air crackled with the gun's leftover crack but nothing stood behind Theresa except for the trees and their frantic branches. She was far enough away that Ellie couldn't see Jane until the baby twisted her head and looked back at the house. Her smooth head bobbed in the darkness.

Maggie stepped closer and Ellie felt the breath leave her chest.

“Theresa...come inside...” Maggie pleaded, her palms turned up. Theresa didn’t move. Maggie’s wild hair burned under the porch light. Ellie clung to the counter and counted Theresa’s slow steps back toward the house.

Theresa didn’t start screaming until they heard the sirens.

“Get in here,” Ellie yelled.

The rest unfolded in threes: Jane’s cries, Theresa’s gun, Maggie’s voice. Then Theresa’s tears, the knock on the door, paper plates pushed off the table. Theresa clutched her child close to her chest, her hand pressed against Jane’s head before collapsing in a kitchen chair.

“Give her to me. Now.” But Theresa either refused or couldn’t hear. Ellie tried shaking off the ringing in her ears but it grew louder when someone knocked on the front door.

“I thought someone was trying to break in!” Theresa screamed. “He was there, running along the bike path and I just-” She looked at the gun in her hand and back at the bike path behind her. No one was there. The weapon clattered against the table.

“Ellie. Answer the door. Where is Charlie? Theresa, look at me.” Maggie dragged a chair across from Theresa and grabbed her friend’s forearms. Ellie counted her steps and felt her body’s pieces falling into place as she reached the door and opened her mouth to explain what had happened. Except she wasn’t sure. It all mixed together and

became white noise. The police, two of them, asked to come in and Ellie imagined she said yes because they pushed past her and followed Jane's screams.

Theresa seemed thrown as the officers entered. They said the neighbors called, asked what happened, pulled out a chair to sit. One. Two. Three. Ellie compartmentalized and got the sudden urge to wash her hands. Her hands reddened under the scalding water and she watched the prominent chords under her skin twist. She grasped her hands together, unsure if the pain came from the heat or her nails as they scraped against her skin.

Jane wouldn't stop. They asked Ellie, please, take her somewhere else. The male officer's expression looked forced into composure. He glared as Ellie passed and extended her arms for Jane. The child had her arms wrapped around her mother and her small fingers dug into Theresa's neck.

"Don't go far." The officer instructed.

"Ellie's going to make it all better. Don't worry, sweetie." Theresa's sticky voice pitched over Jane's screams. Ellie wanted to shake Theresa. The baby couldn't hear her, Ellie could barely hear and she had been walls away. She kept Jane perched on her hip, worried if the baby felt how hard her heart pounded in her chest, it would scare her more.

The police officers stared at their group with their hands on the table. Their bulky shoulders blocked the kitchen's entry. Ellie thought she should explain there were

two others in the house but her voice fell to the back of her throat. Her hip smacked a chair as she hurried out, her hand pressed over Jane's ear.

Jane was wearing a long-sleeved onesie that was too warm and sweat collected along Ellie's forearm. But she stayed in the hallway around the corner so she could hear. She brought Jane closer to a black cat clock in the center of the hallway. Unlike the living room it was the only clock on the wall. Its bulbous eyes snapped right and left, matching its long, swinging tail. In the past, Ellie found Jane frozen beneath it, her little face pointed up at the cat and reaching for his tail. She loved it, but tonight Ellie kept twisting her own body to force the clock in Jane's vision.

"Janie, please. Stop." Ellie planted one foot in the rectangle of light from the kitchen and tried listening. Her blue dress from the night before was creased and matted against her skin. It smelled like smoke.

"Jane, come on." Ellie pleaded. The baby pushed herself out of Ellie's arms but instead of reaching toward her mother in the kitchen, her small hands grabbed the air behind Ellie. She turned, expecting to see Andrea or Charlotte standing sleepy-eyed behind her, demanding an explanation. But instead she saw the guest room door was wide open. The bed's covers were thrown back and the window's mesh guard lied on the ground, the black netting crisscrossed in miniature spiderwebs over the carpet.

Ellie tasted the air coming through the window before she saw it was open.

Her legs shook. Theresa's voice rose and fell in the back of her mind, her fast-paced, high-strung demands fraying at the edges. Ellie wavered and leaned on the bed

for support but the soft mattress gave underneath her leg. She needed Andrea. She must be downstairs but Ellie couldn't go past the officers. Jane leaned her head on Ellie's shoulder, exhausted by her own fear. Leftover tears grew cold and clammy on Ellie's neck as she found her cell phone on the nightstand and called Andrea.

Andrea's voice was groggy and she asked twice if Ellie was there before Ellie stuttered.

"How are you asleep? Can you not hear what's happening?"

Something rustled through the speaker and Ellie pressed the phone harder against her ear but everything around her molded together in a heavy, metallic cloud.

"Andrea, please. Can you go outside and tell me which car is still parked out front."

"What?"

"The car. Tell me which-"

"Oh my god. Fine."

The numbers ticked on the phone's screen. Jane hid her face from the blue-green glow while Ellie felt hypnotized by it. Her vision blurred and the numbers bled over the phone's background. If the broken car was gone, the Ford, then that was okay. It was stupid. She would shake Charlotte so hard her head would roll.

Are you an idiot? Ellie would yell.

What were you thinking?

Do you have any idea what that looks like?

She wouldn't yell, Ellie reconsidered. She'd level. Her voice even and deep so it pushed through Charlotte's body until it became part of her, so the next time she thought about doing something so irrational she would hear Ellie's voice in her arms, her legs, the way it could wrap around her bones.

"Ellie?"

She held the phone up and watched the skinny tree through the window as Andrea told her the Ford was still there.

Andrea

The driveway was cold under her feet. Humidity fought the thin breeze blowing through the yard. She kept thinking she should check the time, but even with her phone in her hand the thought would leave as soon as it appeared. The phone glowed, Ellie hadn't hung up yet, but she couldn't hear anything on the other side.

"Ellie? Are you there? What's going on?"

Andrea pulled back as yellow light shot out from Theresa's house and a figure walked back to the cop car in the driveway. She pressed herself against the house and watched the car's lights swing over the yard, freezing Theresa's house before driving away.

Andrea head pounded and she shut her eyes trying to calm the wave of nausea that swept through her. She steadied herself against Theresa's house and replayed the last few hours before she fell asleep. Charlotte. Charlotte was at the party and even when Andrea shook her off she still felt her younger sister's cloying sadness.

The evening crawled back to her with sticky slowness. She'd been asleep for hours but the whole night felt compressed in a few minutes. There was the music, Theresa's laughter, her mother's wide, pleading eyes as her daughters passed by each other, giving each other too much space.

Ellie had hung up. The phone's flashlight guided her way around the house and through the side entrance where she'd come from the basement. Once inside she heard Theresa directing Maggie through a stilted voice. Andrea stayed by the door, in the space between the stairs and the small ledge leading to the kitchen, and watched her mom sit opposite Theresa. Her frazzled hair shivered under the rotating fan but Maggie didn't move despite Theresa's jumpy commands. Close the blinds, turn off the lights in the other rooms, find Jane, she couldn't decide if she was hungry. The other police officer remained at the table, a notebook in his hand.

"Mom?"

Maggie turned and squinted through the bright kitchen. "I'm sorry we woke you." Her voice was husky, caught in the thick aftermath of tears.

"Ellie did."

"Where is Ellie?"

The officer gestured with his pencil for Andrea to sit. "This your daughter?"

The kitchen chair scraped back and Theresa grabbed her arm. Andrea was too surprised to pull away.

Theresa had wide, hazel eyes that gave the impression she was always too close. Andrea remembered her from her mom's book club and how she'd worn the sleek black-and-white mod earrings. At the party she'd seemed like a woman who jingled

everywhere. She shook her head and bracelets and her laugh jumped like sparks. But now it all rained over Andrea like shards of glass.

“What did you hear?”

Andrea’s lips felt dry and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She estimated the officer was in his late forties, maybe a little older, and blonde hair so light it was translucent. Deep crows’ feet made him look sad, his face tucking itself away. Andrea realized then she was wearing the same black t-shirt and jean shorts from the day before. She touched her face and thought she felt the fading lines of the pillow’s impression on her skin.

“I...nothing. I was asleep and I woke up because...” The officer shifted and all the buckles and fabric on his body shifted with him. “on my own. I was downstairs, I drank too much, and you saw me come upstairs. I always sleep weird when I drink.”

“Did you know Mrs. Pacyek had a gun?”

“No.”

She could feel Theresa shaking beside her. Jane’s cries rose and fell down the hall and the officer rubbed his temples as he got through more questions. Andrea avoided looking at Theresa. The woman she had seen by the stairs, that woman had a gun. It made sense for some reason. But the Theresa at the book club or the Theresa that texted Ellie late on Sunday nights with questions and requests couldn’t have a gun.

Andrea scanned the table and landed on the same salt and pepper shakers from hours before.

“Is everyone okay?”

The officer nodded. Said his partner was out dealing with the runner. He flicked through the final pages in his notebook and tapped his pencil over the table.

“Is anyone else in the house?” he asked without looking up, already halfway standing.

Andrea wanted more time. If she could go in the living room now and freeze all the clocks and the bodies at the table so she could think, she would. The smooth chair felt cold under her legs and in a second she made her own decision.

“No. That’s everyone.”

After the police left, Maggie’s face was shiny with either sweat or tears. Theresa released Andrea’s arm and started begging for her to understand. She swore she had seen someone running through the neighborhood

“I’m allowed. I can do that. I have a license and you heard them, Maggie. Your mom can tell you.” She swiveled around reasons but Andrea still wasn’t sure what happened. Andrea pushed past Theresa and scanned the kitchen table, a mess of leftover plates and food, torn crepe paper hibiscus flowers and crumbled napkins. The

dirty reds and pinks and yellows swirled and stacked together, the wood table visible in spots.

"It was self-defense." Theresa collected herself and her voice deepened as she continued, justified and strengthened by the cops that had just left.

"You shot someone?" Andrea asked.

"Sweetheart, where is Charlotte?"

"No! I missed." Theresa reached for Andrea again but she pulled away. "He's fine. He shouldn't have been running through the back anyway. At this hour?"

The darkness thinned and small patches of light bounced off the gold handles on Theresa's back door. Andrea rocked the front chair legs off the tile floor. She shivered, cold and hot. She wrapped her hands around the end of her t-shirt.

"You could have killed him." Andrea didn't realize she had said it out loud until she realized how quiet the kitchen was. Through the glass the backyard swam into view and a coldness washed over her cheeks. A strand of blonde hair stuck to her lips.

Maggie asked again where Charlotte was, but Andrea couldn't tell her with Theresa in the room. She worried her mom took her silence for an answer because as Theresa explained her rights, the officer's warnings and their warm, understanding voices, Maggie went to the living room. When she came back, her face was white and her thin lips were pressed together.

"They're gone."

Theresa leaned against her countertops, pushing trash in organized piles. Andrea recoiled the more Theresa spread out. Her bare feet slid out over the floor and her head leaned back. Theresa said she had never been so scared in her life. The wider Theresa fanned out, the more Maggie folded and she didn't seem to be listening as Theresa instructed the importance of having a license and protecting yourself. It was especially important now that-

"Now that what?" Andrea bit her words so hard Theresa paused.

"Well..." Theresa between Andrea and Maggie. "Now that Charlie's moved out. At least for now. We're separated."

Maggie looked down the hall, distracted.

"Maggie? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry, Theresa. That's awful."

Theresa agreed and walked them through the process of the twins moving out and Jane being a band aid and how she knew that was terrible but at the time it seemed right. Andrea half-listened but her stories felt like killing time as she wished for Ellie. Andrea hadn't seen her yet, only heard her forced calm through the phone when she asked her to check the cars out front.

The clocks in the living room ticked. Andrea hadn't noticed them at all during the party because the noise drowned them out but now their protruding faces felt like they were taking over the room. Andrea's body was a concoction of leftover wine, panic, and

exhaustion so that when she laid her head down and shut her eyes, the world rushed over her in furious gusts.

“I need to check on Jane.” Theresa’s chair scraped back.

“Andrea,” Maggie leaned close so she could feel her mom’s breath in her ear.

“Where’s Charlotte?”

Hours earlier Charlotte had sobbed and reached out to Ellie, a weird, vulnerable action from someone who never hugged anyone. Andrea’s headache split and melted down her back. She gasped and pushed against her stomach, testing if she was really there. Most of the party was too far away in her memory still, tinged with drunken anger. But the more she found her own skin, popped her knuckles, or rotated her bones, the more she could grasp.

Tears formed not because of what they had yelled at each other, but because she wished the fight wouldn’t stand out to them. She wanted them fading in their long family history of anger and frustration, laughed off if they ever told the story of the time they made idiots of themselves at Ellie’s nannying job one summer.

God, how much did you have to drink? Charlotte could ask.

Shut up. You were so...moody that year.

I know...high school, right?

Charlotte could grow her hair out again because she would get tired of the upkeep. And Andrea could have a real job. Ellie could run her hands over her face as she

remembered Theresa and wonder where Jane was, but not for so long that it would distract her.

Andrea let the vision play out once before sliding her hands under her chin and propping herself on the table. She picked up the cow-shaped salt shaker and turned it in her hands. Its shiny black spots reflected the overhead light while its large head tipped down, a small blade of grass between its lips.

"I don't know, mom. She left, but I don't know where." Something rustled down the hall. Ellie and Theresa's voices muttered low, short sentences until she saw Ellie's bare feet appear. She looked mangled.

"Actually," Andrea started again. "She might be going to dad's."

"Charlotte is?" Ellie asked. When Andrea nodded Ellie placed a hand on the wall and her throat jumped like she was choking. "We need to go."

Singing came from Jane's room. Theresa's voice was too loud and swung too high, insistent on the most joyous notes. Maggie shook her head and her face was hard as she studied Ellie. The grey in her hair stood out among the fading auburn, pushing the color away in larger swaths than Andrea had noticed in the past.

"She took the Camry." Maggie said.

"I know."

"I'm worried that..." Their mom looked like she was fighting with something. Theresa kept singing, her voice like a bell growing louder.

“We can’t go home.” But Andrea knew as soon as she spoke that wasn’t what Ellie meant.

When Andrea thought of Carl, she thought of the way his body looked when Ellie had found him. He was dried out, but what hurt her so much was the way the muscle looked extracted from his body. It was like someone reached inside him and took out every piece that made him mobile and strong, the parts that made him warm. Andrea almost wished Charlotte had killed him more directly because the way Ellie found him meant he had been cold for so long before finally dying.

Charlotte had looked like that when she reached out for Ellie, her arms outstretched for help before everything left her.

“Take Theresa’s car.” Maggie directed.

“Will she-“

“Ellie!” Maggie was rigid. She dragged her palms over the smooth table and her skin squealed against the wood. “Honestly, I don’t think Theresa’s going anywhere today. And I-“ She choked. “I just want Charlotte to be okay. She needs to be here. She can’t run.”

Their mom locked her face and held her body still while she explained to them in a low voice that they would find Charlotte. Chase her down, she instructed.

“I don’t care if she’s screaming.” When Maggie’s deep brown eyes reached Andrea, her heart froze and restarted. “Bring her back to me.”

In that same vision, Andrea thought Maggie could have collapsed at their own kitchen table, maybe less cluttered once they all three moved out. She could have looked between the three of them, smiled, but shoved them out once their time was up. She could stand in her empty home and extend her arms as wide as they could go.

Charlotte

Somewhere in Iowa Charlotte heard her phone vibrate in the glove box. She pressed the gas pedal, masking the sound with the engine's strains. Blue-grey sky cast shadows over her roof, the clouds musty like thick cobwebs. The small awnings over the shop doors popped in her vision and she rubbed her eyes when she stopped at a red light. She heard her phone vibrate again and she responded by turning up her air conditioning so the wind roared in her ears.

She was hungry but she didn't stop. Charlotte envisioned herself at her dad's, tucked away in his small, split-level house with the wood floors and earth-toned furniture. It had been so long since she visited Cleveland and Charlotte muttered possible answers to her dad's inevitable surprise when she showed up a week earlier than she planned. But all she could think of was to blame her mom.

"We got in a fight." Charlotte practiced but started crying halfway through. It wasn't true. Not yet. She didn't want to say it until she was sure her mom's anger was real.

Charlotte tried remembering if there had been a moment where she considered other people's reactions: Ellie, Andrea, Joy, her mom. Her dad would be angry too, right? Charlotte told herself that of course he would be, but when she pictured Wes

finding out she could only see the disdain he had for Lincoln over his stern face. His grey sea-storm eyes animated with satisfaction.

At a stoplight Charlotte realized she wasn't including the deaths in her projections, only the fire.

"I set The Goldenrod fire." Charlotte said out loud. Cars passed her at racing speeds and she gripped the wheel. Only the fire was real. The other thing wasn't. Not yet.

She pictured her dad's face, but it came out smooth and blank.

Ellie

Theresa's car was a boat and it took Ellie well past Omaha to get used to its wide turns. She texted their father they were on their way and then tucked her phone away without waiting for a response. Since leaving Theresa's Ellie and Andrea hadn't spoken, but Ellie was so focused that minutes went by where she forgot Andrea was with her.

"Are you hungry?" Andrea asked.

"A little." Ellie lifted her arms higher on the wheel. "Are you hungry?"

"It's fine." Andrea cracked open her window and fast hot air roared through before she closed it again. She opened and closed the glove compartment before sitting on her hands. "You think we can make it?"

"Mom says we have to."

The thin road dipped through the expansive fields, the corn stalks rippling beside them. The sky was clear and blue it was almost white. Ellie could feel a headache forming above her eyes but she could fight it until the last minute when she would ask Andrea to switch and they would race through the small towns, brick buildings, abandoned post offices, before spitting out into the next major city.

The sky was so thick out here that Ellie thought she could cup her hand and drag it through, the color rolling between her fingers. She could fill her palm with the weight.

“Look at that house.” Ellie followed Andrea’s voice and glimpsed a large, brown and grey brick house on a hill. It was all angles and points, the windows observing the road and guarding the entryway Ellie thought must be in back.

Andrea counted under her breath. “Eight windows.”

“That would look pretty at night.”

“Yeah.”

A car appeared over the hill and startled Ellie, who hadn’t seen another car for miles. She jumped and the car swerved so it rumbled violently over the warning strip on the edge. Cold sweat prickled her forehead and her legs tensed and released. Andrea gripped the dashboard as they sped up and then collapsed back when Ellie took her foot off the gas. They were quiet a moment and Ellie waited for her sister’s criticism.

“He scared me too.” Andrea said instead. “Let me know when you want to switch. I don’t mind at all.”

Ellie responded by showering the front windows with cleaner. Pollen and bugs dissolved and swept aside. The plains swirled around them dizzying and hypnotic and as much as Ellie wished she could melt into them, her back remained stiff. A headache wrapped around her and she squinted through the sun reflecting off the black tar.

“God, when’s the last time it rained?” Andrea asked.

Ellie blinked. Then she snorted.

“What?”

“Nothing, I just...I think the last time I remember it raining was when I found Theresa’s gun.”

Andrea propped her legs on the dashboard. Her knees popped.

“She’s a crazy person.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Well what is she doing with a *gun*? What does she think she’s going to shoot in that neighborhood anyway? God, if I were going to rob a house I’d never do it in one so tight-knit and prissy like that.”

“They’re the ones with all the good stuff.” Ellie licked her dry lips and hunger stabbed through her. She couldn’t ignore it much longer. “Actually, Theresa didn’t have ‘good’ stuff. She had sturdy things or...I don’t know...pleasant things. But nothing really worth stealing.”

“I did notice a lot of wicker.”

Signs for nearby fast food popped up along the road as the exits appeared, branching off in new directions. “I don’t think she’s worried about being robbed anyway.”

Ellie chose an exit. Andrea nodded in Ellie’s periphery. She parked in the closest lot and turned off the car, but neither one of them moved.

In the back of Ellie’s mind she loosely planned the conversation they should have about Charlotte. They hadn’t said their sister’s name once since Maggie handed them

Theresa's keys and sped out of Lincoln. Ellie watched the few patrons through the smudged glass as the short line filed through the space. They were less than halfway to Cleveland but it would go fast, faster if they didn't agree on what they were going to say. Ellie wasn't even sure if she agreed with their mom that Charlotte should come back. Cleveland wasn't neutral territory, but it was a space that held a particular tension that pushed them together instead of repelled them. Every time Ellie and her sisters went they wanted out, which was why Ellie thought it was a place where they could thread their triangle back together.

"I'm starving." Ellie said.

"Me too."

"Do you think Charlotte has money? For food and stuff."

Andrea sucked in her breath. Her exhale sound like a growl and she leaned over, pressing her palms against her eyes. People walked by the car and glanced in, some averting their gaze but some lingering long enough that Ellie felt watched. Heat grew in the car and Ellie reached for the door, not sure if she would exit or let the car air out. Andrea spoke up.

"I hate her right now."

Ellie released the handle. "I know."

"I don't want to be around her."

Skinny trees surrounded the parking lot, their branches barely thick enough to hold their sprouting leaves. Ellie tried peeling her dress' damp fabric from her lower back.

"I am so, so sorry about Carl."

"It's not just that."

A strong wind blew over the car and after miles of cutting through open air silently, the deep, guttural wind startled Ellie. Leaves around them shook and bounced while a couple walking through the lot paused, the woman clutching her wide-brimmed hat.

Ellie swallowed. "I don't think she did it on purpose."

"You don't?"

"I can't...I can't think that right now. I can't keep driving while assuming she...killed Carl or..." her head throbbed. Her skull detached itself from her brain. "The only way I know how to handle this right now is act as if Charlotte made a mistake. She acted with...maybe not good intentions, definitely not good but-" She rambled. Andrea's face set in stone.

"You don't always have to have a solution."

Ellie didn't believe that, but the sound of it coming from Andrea unscrewed her chest and Ellie collapsed against her seat. Her dress crawled over her legs, suctioned to

her stomach, and the pain in her head leaked over her shoulders. They needed food.

Water. Easy objectives that would keep them moving forward.

They had no other choice, Ellie decided, and pushed open her door.

Andrea

Andrea hesitated explaining how she compared Carl and Charlotte. It felt weird and dreamy, and Ellie was already caught up in her own thoughts. They ate, but the food tasted like nothing. Then they drove again, Ellie insistent she was fine and stayed at the wheel.

“Do you remember the mulberry trees by our house growing up?” Andrea asked near Naperville.

“Yeah.”

Down the street from the house they used to have, the land was dented so the mulberry trees nestled in a small bowl. A semi-busy street went by on the other side but the trees muted passing cars. It was dark and cool. A steep creek ran between the bowl and a row of townhomes on the opposite side. It smelled but Andrea found it romantic the way rounded stones lined the edges of the water. They would stand at the top and race leaves from one end to the tunnel on the other.

Larger oaks shielded the sky while the mulberry trees hung underneath, the thick berries dragging the branches down. Most could be picked easily and Andrea, always the taller one of the three, could pull down a branch for the others. They weren’t sure where Charlotte heard it, but one day she declared the best ones were at the top and began

climbing through the trees' narrow spaces. Amazed by their baby sister's flexibility and fearlessness, they let her, but Ellie kept her hands rounded at the trees' bases, hoping she could catch Charlotte if she fell.

"And she did fall, didn't she? So I wasn't wrong." Ellie said when Andrea mentioned her paranoia.

"I was always jealous."

"Even after Charlotte broke her arm?"

Andrea leaned her forehead against the window's glass. "Yeah, actually, a little. I always thought kids with casts were cool."

Ellie laughed.

"Do you think Charlotte will come with us when we tell her to?" Concrete surrounded them and sunlight caught in the dark circles beneath Ellie's eyes.

"Charlotte will...Charlotte will do whatever Charlotte wants."

"So what are we doing?"

Ellie checked over her shoulder and changed lanes. They spotted the first sign for Cleveland and Ellie sped forward so the low buildings ran by in a blur.

"When was the last time we checked our phones?" Ellie waved her hand at their purses lying at Andrea's feet. Andrea had felt her own bag vibrate a few times but ignored it. She told herself that if she felt it go off multiple times an hour, then she would look at

it. She didn't like being detached from it but her fear of it felt stronger than her desire to know what might be flashing over the screen.

"At least mine then, please? Can you check it?"

Andrea shuffled through Ellie's bag and found her black phone. She smoothed her thumb over the uncracked screen before pressing the button at the bottom.

"Which one do you want first?" Blocks of texts and push notifications appeared against the faded pink background.

Are you okay? Noah asked. *It's been a while since I've heard from you. Call me?*

char just passed Chicago. thought she wasnt coming until next week. fight w
mother? Their dad asked. Andrea rolled her eyes.

"Anything from mom?"

"Just one that says 'I love you.'"

The car plunged into shadows as they drove under a bridge.

"Nothing from Charlotte."

The phone's familiar weight comforted Andrea and she switched Ellie's for her own without responding to the messages. She propped her feet on the dashboard and scrolled through her own messages. Her dad hadn't texted her and Sam asked if Andrea had seen her silver hoop earrings. In the mess of Theresa's house Andrea forgot she set

up notifications for the fires in Lincoln, and she clicked on an older one. The thumbnail depicted a close-up shot of The Goldenrod before the fire.

But when the page opened Andrea realized it wasn't a shot of The Goldenrod at all, it was the Governor's mansion. She zoomed in on the photo that displayed a row of brown and crumbling flowers, their petals flaked around the black bars dividing the mansion from a homemade sign reading *You Kill, We Kill*.

"I didn't know about this." Andrea said.

"Know about what?"

Andrea dropped her feet and read the article. Fingerprints on the sign matched fingerprints found on a piece of metal found near The Goldenrod in the fire's aftermath.

"Andrea?"

"The boy who set the bookstore he wasn't part of a weird cult or group or anything."

"Are you asking me?"

"No, I'm just..."

Andrea pushed her feet against the floor so her legs lifted off her seat. The seatbelt restrained her. The air tasted stale and she rolled down the window enough to feel the hot wind whip through the car. The sudden noise frightened Ellie, who swerved enough that the car beside them laid on his horn and sped off. Ellie yelled, more alarmed than angry, but Andrea scrolled through her phone again for more articles. But as the days

ticked by from the first reporting of the fire, the articles grew shorter and more speculative.

Andrea studied Ellie's face. Her jaw jutted forward in a way Andrea always thought made Ellie look pointed. She looked tan and her blonde highlights were coming out from under her darker layers. But there was also something washed out and weathered about her. She looked dehydrated and Andrea thought she could see the fine fissures running along her sister's skin. Not wrinkles, but something shallower and new.

"Do you know something I don't?" Andrea asked.

Water flashed behind Ellie. The blue lake glittery and animated through the window. In front of the them the road curved and wound through the green land, disappearing through more valleys and more fields.

"Let's just get to Cleveland first."

"Were you ever in that back room at Full Moon? Where Theo and all them hung out?"

Ellie shook her head. Andrea dropped her phone in her purse. She pushed her tongue against the back of her teeth, feeling the gaps and dragging her tongue over the tops until it stung like it had been bit. Everything about her ached and she wanted to stretch her body out the length of the car and then run until the restless, twitching sensation in her legs died. How did Ellie sit so still?

Andrea dropped her forehead on her knees and tried remembering the back room. It was dusty and cold. But was it always cold or did she feel that way because of the sweat that dried over her arms and legs as she sat uncomfortably on that worn out couch? She remembered flipping through books and ignoring Theo's too-casual tone and light dismissal of those around him. He annoyed her, and she hated noticing any hint of Charlotte agreeing with him.

But she couldn't remember what they had been talking about. She couldn't remember if Charlotte agreed with him or just humored him. Maybe she gave him her stoic, icy stare they all learned to look past.

Andrea pulled her hands through her hair and tried picturing every piece of the room.

Ellie dragged a sponge over the window at a gas station. The dirty water dripped down the glass and carried bugs and dust in thin rivers.

"Did you ever meet Theo?" Andrea asked when Ellie returned. She still wouldn't switch seats. Ellie thought a moment.

"Not formally. I just saw him around when I dropped Charlotte off at things."

"Like where?"

Theresa's car started without any problems.

Cleveland grew closer. Their dad texted twice more, one announcing that Charlotte had arrived and another annoyed that no one had responded yet.

“Ask him if Charlotte seems okay.” Ellie told Andrea. Andrea typed it but didn’t press ‘send.’

Clouds floated overhead and the ground swelled with late afternoon heat. The air was cooler here, thinner so it flowed down her throat in cold streams. She gulped it down and mourned the miles behind them, wishing they could start over and she could have more time.

Cleveland’s pointed buildings stood silhouetted in the darkening sky. The sun’s remaining rays reached between the concrete and tried pulling itself between the buildings as the day faded away. Ellie clicked the turn signal again and again and Andrea felt they were spinning closer to the city’s center. They would cut through buildings though, past the shops and the people and out in the suburbs. All day the sun remained over them, reminding them it was there in reflective surfaces, the heat on the back of her neck, as it bounced off glass and wavered over the pavement. And now all at once it shifted, dragging its hands as it vanished behind the earth.

Charlotte

She claimed exhaustion and hid in the bedroom in the far end of the hallway. Her dad hugged her but when she tried pulling away he changed his side hug to a full hug, his large arms heavy over her shoulders.

“What’s going on with you, kid?” His rough voice moved fast and Charlotte had a hard time interpreting his words. He accepted her excuse but knocked on her door a few seconds after she crawled in the single bed.

“You have enough blankets?”

Charlotte nodded.

Wes took half a step in the room, blocking the hallway light with his large frame. “I have to work tomorrow but let me know what you want for dinner. It’s been awhile but I can cook us something big. Have fun with it.”

Charlotte couldn’t think about food. The idea felt loose and dirty like ash. Everything felt and tasted and looked like ash right now. But she twisted a smile across her face and told her dad that sounded good, great. She would love to.

He stood in the door a moment longer, his hand on the doorknob before he huffed and closed the door behind him.

Charlotte couldn't fall asleep. She lay beneath the covers, shivering and listening to the television play. The show was unfamiliar but male voices spoke calm and low until they exploded in excited yells. Poker champions or golfers or cooking shows. It could have been any one of those but they were all shows Charlotte knew from a younger version of her father. She had no idea what he watched these days.

He was snoring when there was a knock on the front door. The sound beat over Charlotte and she was halfway out of bed when she heard Ellie's voice. Charlotte pressed her ear against the door and heard Wes ask about their drive, if they were hungry. He reprimanded them for not communicating before he asked about the car.

"Did your mother get you that car?"

Ellie's fast response disappeared and Charlotte assumed they leaned out the front, following their dad as he got a closer look. Charlotte's legs shook and she slid down the door. From her pocket she took out the broken zippo lighter and smoothed her thumb over the lines on the lighter's side. She pushed down the tiny wheel and a flame jumped in front of her, lighting only the thin skin on her hand before disappearing again.

Andrea

She called her mom at night, after her dad fell asleep and even when Maggie had an early shift at Markman's. The calls had been out of obligation at first. Andrea was mad at her mom for making them drive all the way to Cleveland only for Ellie to take Charlotte back a week later. But Andrea missed her mom's voice and worried the fault line of her panic cracked deeper each day.

It had been Charlotte's decision. She told her dad she wanted to leave after Ellie was offered a job at Nebraska Game and Parks. He hugged Ellie as she said goodbye and told Charlotte she was flighty just like her mother.

Andrea thought about telling him Charlotte was in trouble, but instead she just told him she was trying as hard as she could. Leaving with Ellie was more of a matter of self-preservation instead of flightiness or even a lack of consideration for him.

"She's helping a friend," was all Andrea told him as she watched them drive away in Theresa's car and thinking about Theo's picture in the *Journal Star* a few days before.

Andrea couldn't go with them. She had her bag in one hand and the door handle in the other but stopped when she saw Charlotte's head bowed in the back seat. Her shorn hair had begun growing back and she looked drawn out and puffy. The red around

her eyes had slowly disappeared over the few days at their dad's but now they had a filmy glaze that dragged over the floor when someone said Charlotte's name.

Andrea was so angry.

She had released the door handle and stepped back in her dad's lawn. She could feel her dad looking at her but Andrea kept her eyes on Ellie, shaking her head while Ellie stood on the other side of the car and sighed. Ellie's fingers lingered over the door before dipping below and pulling it shut. As they pulled away the sun's glare blocked Andrea's view of their faces. Andrea waved even though she wasn't sure if they saw.

"Until school starts." Andrea told everyone. But she wasn't sure if that was true. And she was okay with that.

On the first day of August Andrea dipped her bare feet in her dad's pool and pulled her denim shorts back to avoid the damp spots around the edge. She hadn't cleaned it yet and thick bunches of leaves floated closer. She cringed as she tried kicking one away and the slimy bundle clung to her leg.

Her dad wasn't supposed to be back from work for a few hours, but since Charlotte's arrest he came and went at strange times. The night before Andrea heard him leave at two, returning thirty minutes later with nine different kinds of tea. He told her he couldn't decide on one and they sat in the dining room, hands around their mugs until the tea went cold.

A breeze rippled the water and goosebumps pricked Andrea's skin. A tall wooden fence looped around her dad's backyard but she could still see the neighbor's small white dog lounging in a patch of sun. Andrea hadn't eaten all day but hunger felt like a nuisance, one she ignored until the last possible moment when her arms shook and her stomach expanded with emptiness.

A new sketchbook lied beside her, absorbing the water as it leaked over the concrete and spread through the pages. Andrea brought the book outside every day but she opened it just so she could rest her hands on the blank pages. She wanted to draw and some mornings she woke up flooded with ideas: she could walk through her dad's shady neighborhood or accept his offer to get closer to Erie for a day. But for the moment she enjoyed how blank the pages were. She liked she could smooth her hand over them and come away clean, no pencil marks or weeping ink.

Andrea jumped as wind picked up and slammed the screen door closed. Three tall windows lined the back of her dad's house and were covered but she thought she saw her dad's outline move across the farthest one. Andrea deflated. She had been hoping he would stay at work for the day, not because she wanted him gone, but because it created a sense of normalcy that she could rely on. A tree branch shifted and released the sun hidden behind its branches and heat spread over Andrea's neck. Her dad was definitely home and walked from his bedroom window, past the one in the kitchen, until the backdoor opened and he stepped on the patio.

"Andy?" Her dad was the only one that called her that. She didn't mind it today.

"I'm here."

"It's kind of chilly to be swimming."

"I don't mind." The truth was she hadn't noticed. She came out here every day and didn't notice until she looked down after hours and was surprised her legs hadn't dissolved.

Wes walked over and Andrea could hear the loose change clinking in his pockets. His shiny black shoes lined up beside her but he didn't squat down. Instead he stopped a few inches away, his foot near her blinking cell phone. He shaded his eyes and looked over his backyard.

"Gotta mow one of these days."

Andrea hummed.

"Want anything for dinner, kid?"

"Whatever is fine."

The fridge was already stocked with food. Piles and mountains of it. They cooked, throwing their whole selves into a frenzy braising and frying and letting the heat and steam fill the kitchen before sitting down and barely eating any of it. Andrea touched her face, the tips of her fingers damp. She often suggested going out and hoped that being surrounded by people would force them to behave like everyone around them.

"Talk to Ellie today?"

“No.”

He paused. Then huffed and asked if she had spoken to her mother.

“No.”

Last night Maggie had asked Andrea to come back for a few days. But they were still waiting for Charlotte’s trial date and Andrea didn’t see a purpose going back until they knew it for sure. Andrea told her mom she would come back some time but they both knew that ‘some time’ was filler. Andrea felt like she was filling time and space and words with softness so they were easier to rest her head on. She was so tired.

The water moved her legs in lopsided circles. Her dad stood beside her with his hands in his pockets. Charlotte had texted her a few times but never called. Andrea responded once and told Charlotte that everything would be fine. At the time it hadn’t been a lie, but sometimes it felt like one. The wind picked up. Trees’ limbs batted against each other and more leaves fell in the pool. Andrea flipped through her sketchbook’s blank pages. The edges brushed against her hand that held the book in place until she let the cover fall open so the spiral stuck out. With one hand she steadied the book, and with the other she tore out one page at a time and dropped them in the water.